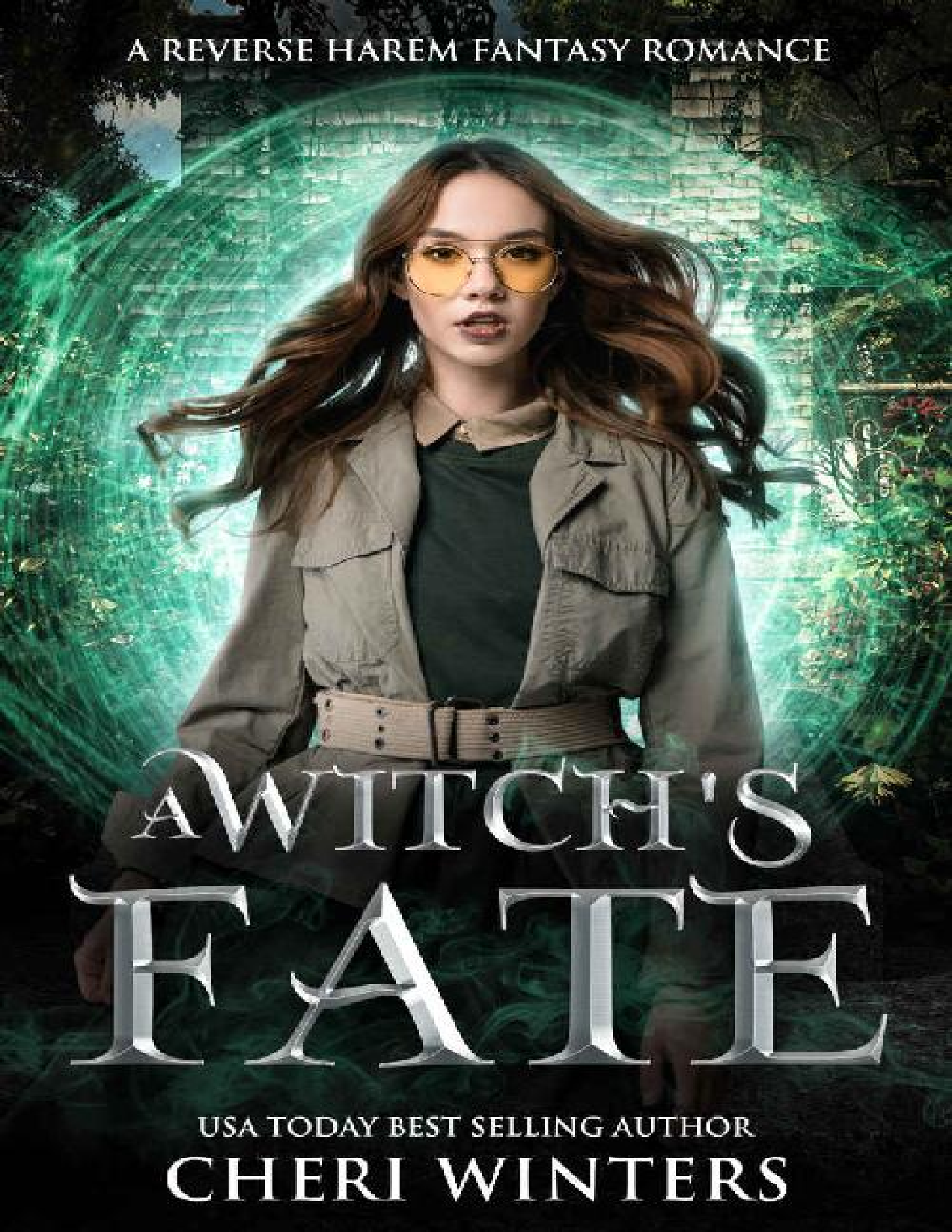
A REVERSE HAREM FANTASY ROMANCE



A WITCH'S FATE

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

CHERI WINTERS

A Witch's Fate
Negre Clan

Book 2

by

Cheri Winters

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Please note that this work is intended only for adults over the age of 18 and all characters represented as 18 or over.

Prologue

One vampire. One demon. One werewolf and I’m in the middle of it all.

One minute, I’m eighteen and thinking about getting out of this small town and going to college, the next I’m being taken by a vampire and told that I’m the key to stop the demon and vampires taking over the world.

They say that we’re mates.

They say that I’m to help their kind.

Stop the war.

Stop the destruction of all mankind.

Oh, and there’s one secret that my family has been hiding for years….I just found out that I’m a witch. My best friend turns out to be a werewolf and my friend a demon. My world couldn’t get any crazy. College life has nothing on me right now.

Author's Note:

A Witch's Fate is a full-length standalone reverse-harem fantasy novel.

Chapter One
Ivy Sparks

I do not like waking to my alarm. Even the sweetest music I can find to download to my phone just seems so harsh as it pulls me from sleep — a very literal rude awakening that just starts my day on a little sour note. It's so much nicer when Grandma gets me up.

In the years that I've lived with her, my sleeping mind has learned to listen for her treading on the one creaky step on the stairway up, coupled with the scent of her coffee brewing wafting up from the kitchen, so I'm already half-aware by the time she gently taps on my door. "The other stars are in bed. Now it's your time to shine," she says. So, so corny, I know, but it's Grandma. It's how she's always waken me up, as long as I can remember.

It's not really that I hate my phone's alarm. I mean, it's a lovely song, 'Good Morning' from the musical 'Singin' in the Rain' played on the piano, but it's not Grandma's voice and her silly little saying. It means that Grandma's on the road again. She drives a truck – mostly she does little runs between here, Denver, Boulder, and Colorado Springs, but sometimes the company needs her to run out to the east coast, and she'll be gone for days.

I'm the only child of two only children, no siblings, no cousins, no aunts and uncles. Since my parents died in a car accident when I was five, she's the only family I've got left. When she's on the road, the house just seems terribly empty. Even if I have Kate and Nathan come for a sleepover,

it’s not the same as having her home. Grandma is more than family to me now, she’s the only thing that connects me with my past.

The other thing about the way Grandma wakes me up, the way my mind can tell she’s coming and wanders gently out of sleep to meet her, is that I don’t remember the dreams. They’re gone by the time I wake.

When my phone intrudes on my sleep the way it does, I always remember what I was dreaming about, and a lot of the time, it’s Mom and Dad. They’re never bad dreams, I don’t dream about how it must have been when they died in the accident, or about the night Grandma was watching me and they never came home, or when they were mad at me, or I was mad at them. I always have happy dreams about them, and that’s the worst part of it all. Because I know that I will never, ever feel that happiness again. Waking up to that feeling, with Grandma being somewhere, hundreds of miles away on empty highways just takes something out of me. It’s the exact same thing my parents were doing when Dad fell asleep at the wheel, and their car crashed through the guardrail and went right off the side of a mountain.

But I can’t dwell on that every time Grandma is gone. I crawl out of bed, shower, put on half a pot of coffee, half as strong as Grandma makes it, and let it brew while I do my morning drills on my piano – the gorgeous Mason & Hamlin Model B that I bought with part of the insurance and inheritance from my parents’ deaths. The piano was Carl’s idea.

“You don’t need to save all of it for college,” he told me. “You’re going to get tons of scholarships. You’ll be fine when the time comes. So buy something — today — that will remind you every day of how much you loved them.”

Carl and I, we get each other. We met at the beginning of high school, and I found out that his parents died about the same time mine did. He’s

never told me exactly what had happened to them, just that one died not long after the other. I think his dad, at least, was military or something, but I've never been able to figure out what his mom did. In many ways, I know so much about him, about who he is, but I don't think I'll ever know exactly what happened to him.

I took some money from the trust fund a few years back. Even buying it used, and having Grandma haul it home from Connecticut for free while on one of her east coast runs, it was a pretty extravagant expense. But it is such an amazing instrument, the big, complex, full sound of a grand piano, while still able to fit into our den. And to be quite honest, it sounds a hundred times better than the beat up old pianos that we have at school, or even the lovely vintage Steinway that my piano teacher has. Ever since I bought the Model B, she's come to my place for every single lesson.

After finishing my morning practice, I run upstairs to finish getting ready for the day. I put on a bit of makeup to try to put a bit of life in my face. It's early spring in Stokers Mill. Everybody is pale from not having seen much sun since September or so, but even against that background, I still stand out as lighter than everybody else. It's not like I'd be mistaken for a corpse or anything if I didn't put some effort in, but I just feel like I look more present and just more ready to face the day if I add a little bit of color.

Once that's settled, I pour my coffee into a travel mug, splash in a bit of cream, and grab a couple of bars on my way out the door. We haven't had a really good rain since the last snow to wash the salt and sand off of the pavement, so I take it slow on the twisty road that leads up from my house in the valley to the school. That's why I find myself so surprised when some idiot on a loud motorcycle comes up on me from behind. He drifts in way too close to my back bumper as I navigate a long no-passing zone. In my mirror, I see that he's well bundled up against the cool morning, heavy

black stocking cap, big, goggle-like sunglasses, face mask, heavy leather jacket and thick gloves.

We hit a short, straight section, barely long enough to safely pass under the best of circumstances, and there's a big pickup truck coming toward us. I can feel the tension in the rider behind me, as he keeps revving his engine, like a racehorse chomping at the bit to get out the gate. The second the pickup and I pass each other, the he opens the engine up all the way, and the motorcycle roars past me. I start to panic when I see another car round the curve ahead, coming straight at the bike. I brake hard to give him room to get over, and he takes a quick glance to be sure he's clear, and swerves into my lane, just a couple dozen feet from decorating the hood of the oncoming car. He looks over his shoulder at me and gives me this funny, two-fingered salute with a little twist in the wrist, and I suddenly realize it's Ben Wake. He's the new guy at school. He just moved to town over the winter break, and started classes with the new semester. That little wrist twisty salute is kind of his trademark greeting. As he tears off ahead of me, I can't believe that the quiet, brooding and mysterious boy that reads stuffy old novels would ride like such a maniac. But then again, maybe his unsettling, dark demeanor and his obsession with things long gone were indicative of some sort of deep rooted death wish that the motorcycle brings blazing to the surface.

I realize that the last time I had a close call like that on the road, I ended up having to pull over to let a panic attack pass before I could finish my drive. I think it's only the fact that I'm so upset at Ben for being such an idiot that's keeping me going. I really need to have some words with him when I get to school.

Fortunately, the rest of the drive in goes well, so I'm mostly relaxed by the time I pull into the school's parking lot. Kate and Nathan are sitting

outside on the steps in the sun. I join them, leaning back and unzipping my jacket. It's not really warm, but for the first time in months, it's not cold either. Up in the mountains, you take what you can get. I tell them about Ben almost getting himself killed on the way in, and they tell me how he pulled into the lot way too fast, swerving around and showing off. Ben hadn't really warmed to anybody at all in the few months he'd been going to school with us. He is so quiet and withdrawn, so we can't really figure out why he was being so out there that morning with his stupid bike.

"Maybe it just makes him feel alive or something," Carl says, coming up behind us.

"Morning, Graylock," Kate says.

Carl very visibly winces at the nickname, but doesn't say anything. He learned long ago to not fight it, but he still runs his hand along his temple, trying to bury the ashy gray streak under the rest of his sleek, black hair.

"Sit!" I tell him, patting the step next to me. "Now tell me, since you're a dumb boy, too…" I wink at him, to let him know I'm just teasing. He smiles to let he know he's not offended. "How does smearing yourself all over the front end of a Volvo make you feel more alive?"

"You're laughing at Death," Carl says. "Letting him know that someday, you belong to him, but not yet. Not right now."

"Ugh, Carl! If I hadn't seen that car and stomped my brakes, he would have died right next to me. Stupid, stupid idiot!"

"Well, what can I say? Some of us boys are more stupid than others."

"Next time he does that to me, I'm going to kill him myself."

"No big loss," Kate says.

Nathan and Carl nod in agreement.

I know they aren't really serious, but I can't help but think that maybe if we were warmer to him, he'd be warmer to us. Stokers Mill is the kind of

place where everybody sort of knows everybody else. It's a great place to be from, because you are never far from somebody that can help you out if something goes wrong. But it can also be really hard to move there, because you just don't have those ties.

When Carl moved here, it took him about a year before people really let him in. Part of that, honestly, is that he eventually learned to put up with the ribbing about his gray streak with good humor. Maybe it's because Grandma really took to him. Grandma is kind to everybody, but there are very few that ever truly get close, and Carl is one of them. When people realized that Grandma looked at him almost like a second grandchild, that's when things really started to change for Carl.

Ben. I can't see Ben finding Grandma's favor. He reads too much, carries too much of an artful black cloud around, dresses a little too fussily compared to the average jeans-and-flannel Stokers Mill guy. I can't help but wonder, though, for as much as it's still making me angry, maybe riding in hard on a Triumph might show the rest of the guys that he can lighten it up a bit and let loose. Maybe. We'll see.

"Hey!" Kate says, poking me in the ribs. "C'mon. The bell."

I realize that I had gotten so far into my thoughts about Ben that I never heard it. "Sorry," I say. I know I can't admit that I was thinking about Ben, so I spit out the first lie I can think of. "I think I just figured out that crazy bonus problem from last night's math homework."

"What?" Kate asks. "Ivy IQ didn't finish her homework?"

Carl elbows me, grinning. He knows that I hate that nickname almost as much as he hates Graylock.

"It was a tough one!" I protest. "And Grandma got delayed yesterday by that bad flooding on the Mississippi. She had to take a two-hundred mile detour to find a bridge she could get the truck across. It left me kind of

distracted.” That is not completely a lie. I was worried sick about her, but I dealt with it by narrowing my focus down to nothing but my homework, and I’d defeated the bonus question.

I’m almost to my locker when I see Ben. He gives me his little salute again, with a sly grin.

“Ben!” I say through gritted teeth. “That was not funny. You scared me to death out there.”

He opens his mouth to say something, and finds Carl right up in his face, flanked by Kate and Nathan.

“Whatever you’re about to say, don’t,” Carl says. “You want to be a jackass in class or at lunch or in the hallway, fine. But never, never, ever mess with Ivy on the road, or we’re going to have some real problems.”

I feel a chill descend on the hallway. People stop and stare at Carl, all up in Ben’s business, looking ready to deck the guy. I read the mood of the crowd, and easily half of them just want him to do it.

“Carl,” I say. “He doesn’t know. Let it be.”

Carl puffs himself up a bit, leans in at Ben. Not for the first time, I get this sense that there’s a lot more to Carl than anybody suspects. Like he contains something larger than himself. Somehow, he seems strikingly more masculine, I swear he grows a couple of inches so he almost looms over Ben, and his hair gets fuller.

Ben backs away. “Ok,” he says. “Never again.” He takes another step away.

I put a hand on Carl’s shoulder. “Let it be,” I whisper.

He exhales, and seems to soften up and shrink back to the usual Carl, my orphaned brother from another dead mother.

“Ms. Sparks,” Ben says, with a slight bow and a decently contrite look on his face. “My most sincere apology for my behavior earlier today. I let

the spirit of the day infect me without regard for the safety of others on the road. It was inexcusable."

I turn and walk away. By not accepting his apology, I've just put a big black mark on his name. One more hurdle he'll have to leap to gain acceptance in the school and in the town. I'm so mad at him! But at the same time, he deserved the chance to make it right, and I didn't give it to him. That one's going to be on me.

"I hope after graduation he goes far, far away," Nathan whispers as we continue on our way.

"Forever," Kate says.

"Yeah," I say, but my heart isn't in it.

By the time I get my locker open, the second bell is ringing. I have just enough time to throw my jacket and hat in, and not enough to sort out the books I need, so I just grab a handful and hope the right ones for the next two periods are in the stack. Just as I'm slamming the locker door, I see a folded piece of parchment-colored paper inside. I don't have time to deal with it, so it'll have to wait.

It isn't until lunch that I am near my locker alone, and have a chance to retrieve the mysterious piece of paper. It immediately feels expensive — heavy and just a little bit rough, almost like the handmade paper that my cousin picked out for her wedding invitations, but more refined. It's very carefully and precisely folded, tied with a crimson ribbon, with a dab of red wax sealing the knot.

I look around and see there's no way I'll be able to open it up without attracting attention. I'm tempted to step into the restroom, but I feel that would be too irreverent for something presented in such a carefully composed package.

Then I remember the little hallway behind the band room that leads to the changing rooms and uniform storage. Nobody ever goes back there in the middle of the day. In fact, it's where I first made out with a boy, back when I was a sophomore. That seems like the right place for reading this mysterious note. As always during the lunch hour, a handful of students are in the band room practicing. One of them is playing Liszt's 'Liebenstraum'. Perfect song, even if it's on the ancient practice piano that is never quite in tune, and they keep tripping over one particularly difficult bar.

It just somehow seems to set the mood just right. I take the note out of the book I'd tucked it into and break the wax seal. Gently I pull one of the free ends of the ribbon and the knot comes undone. I unfold the paper and see immediately that it's a Villanelle. We'd just studied those in English class the week before, reading Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle into that good night'.

The poem is handwritten in a neat and very precise cursive. It's different than the one Grandma uses, more elegant despite its precision, with subdued little flourishes. If I had to guess, I'd say it was written with a fountain pen, because the line width varies. I look at the title, 'Beautiful Ivy Climbing Up the Wall', and start to read.

Beautiful ivy climbing up the wall
To reach the cold and distant stars
From the dark soil, you hear the call

From deep roots you ever sprawl
Soft green hiding cracks and scars
Beautiful ivy climbing up the wall

Each careful step so sure, so small
Yet the distance covered great
From the dark soil, you hear the call

Bringing life to cold and sterile halls
Your verdant shroud warms cold slate
Beautiful ivy climbing up the wall

Ever onward cruel time crawls
Whispering quiet hints of fate
From the dark soil, you hear the call

From modest earth to towers tall
Such brilliant life your touch creates
Beautiful ivy climbing up the wall
From the dark soil, you hear the call

Best,
B. Wake

I let myself sink down against the wall. I read it again, comparing it mentally to the one other time a boy with a crush on me had written me a poem. It was a clumsy, sugary thing with cliché rhymes and a repetitive, sing-song meter. This poem is different. The images don’t stand still for me. I have to go back and read it a second time to start absorbing it. A third to finally fix it in my mind. This is no simple schoolboy poem, but something trying to communicate a feeling coming from a different place than mere

infatuation or lust. It’s somebody telling me that they see me as a force of nature, and that they are willing to face it.

I have to chuckle a little bit as I read that. Me, as a force of nature, the desire of life itself to always grow and spread! I think back to morning, looking in the mirror as I put color to my pale skin, so my black hair and green eyes didn’t overpower my face.

Of course! My green eyes. The finest thing my mother left me, according to Grandma. Her son, my father, apparently could not resist them. Bright green leaves against white slate… I know exactly where Ben got that image. Ben, the only person I’ve ever met with skin paler than mine…

Chapter Two

Ben Wake

I do not like waking to the sun.

Under the best of circumstances, it is a great annoyance. At worst, it can kill me. At least I've got a bedroom on the west side of the house, with the mountains behind me, so I never get direct light into my bedroom. But when I stay up too late into the night, and forget to draw the blackout curtains before going to sleep, even the dull and reflected light coming into my room drags me out of slumber into a state of disorientation and terribly foul temper.

I cocoon myself in my bedclothes to cover as much of my skin as I can while I walk over to the window and jerk the blackouts shut. A rasp of irritation escapes my throat as I crawl back into bed, just as my stomach growls. Bad enough that I seared myself awake by forgetting to draw the curtains last night, but my body is demanding I feed as well. I will need to go out tonight and hunt. Every day that I wait, the hunger gets more insistent, and my control over it gets weaker. Leave it too long, and I may as well be a thrope, a wild thing stalking anything with a heartbeat and ripping it apart in a frenzy of bloodlust.

Fortunately, I've never let my thirst consume me that much, but I've seen it happen. The last year of the Great War, there was a squad of

vampires calling themselves the Sângele Pierdut – the Lost Bloods — that intentionally let themselves go that feral, starving themselves in cages until they lost all sense of themselves, their pride, their inherited nobility, reducing themselves to mad beasts, crawling on all fours, barely able to speak, clothes rent to mere rags, their skin sallow and filthy. Then somebody would hear rumor of a pack of thropes holed up somewhere, and a cage would be loaded into a truck and driven out.

It is rare that the vampire survived the encounter, but he'd always take four or five thropes with him. Honestly, our best fighters couldn't take down four wolves at once, even on their best days. I saw a Sângele Pierdut in action once – we were staking out a pack, and didn't know that one of the other clans was also watching them. We were maybe a day out from moving in on the pack when we saw the Lost Blood burst out of nowhere into the middle of their camp. The thrope on guard was pupped up, but even with his better senses of hearing and scent in that form, he never had a chance. The creature went for his throat with such violence that it ripped his head right off. The second thrope to go down at least had time to scream while frantically reaching for his gun. Those were the only ones the Sângele Pierdut got easily. One thing about thropes is that even in their human shape, they're fast and they're sharp. But a Lost Blood in its lust isn't stopped easy. After we'd shot down the thropes he didn't get, we went in and found more than a dozen silver bullets in its body. Worse, though, is that we found it also killed three mortals on its way to the thrope camp. Most of the clan didn't mind that, but I did.

I still do care about mortals. Humans. I still don't understand why most vampires, after a decade or so, lose touch so completely with what they once were, and develop such contempt for the warm. Each of us was born to a warm father and mother. But most of us, when we get turned, seem to

think that some divine hand lifted us up, personally, because we were so much better than the world we were born into.

I can tell you, it was no god that chose me to receive the sacred gift of the vampires' blood. My mama în sânge was an elder named Sonia Vătafu. She was bored, hanging around Fort Slocum in 1917, looking for something strong and alive to toy with. I was supposed to travel to New York City the next day to board a ship for France to fight in World War One, which was also called the Great War at the time. I snuck off post with a couple of friends to get drunk and maybe find some girls so we wouldn't go off to war as virgins…

People that Sonia sets her eyes on rarely live to see the morning. She certainly wasn't planning on it when she saw me that night. I was going to be drained of blood and left in the woods, right up until the moment when she asked me, just to make conversation so she could lure me out of the bar, what I was up to that night. And I boldly told her that I was hoping for the company of a beautiful woman before departing to face the crimson clash of war.

My attempt to woo her with a line from a Stephen Crane poem struck her fancy just right, so she turned me instead of killing me that night. That is the only reason I am a vampire today. I amused somebody that was intending to kill me. I am no better than anybody else, no more and no less. I'm just a fool that got lucky after he got real unlucky one night.

I shake my head to try and snap out of the memory of Sonia and of the wars. Springtime is always rough for me. As the days become longer, the sun setting later and rising earlier, I find myself increasingly cut off from people. By summer, I'm usually used to it, but after having so much time in the winter that I can move about freely between the longer nights and

cloudy days, seeing it taken away from me, nibble by nibble, every day, depresses me terribly.

I don’t sweat, and I didn’t do anything yesterday to make me dirty, so I don’t really need to shower, but it’s a comfortable routine for me. The same with brushing my teeth. I don’t need to do it except after I feed. I get dressed, and greet Paul and Carol on my way out to the garage. They are strange people, but quiet and polite. We have an agreement. They pretend to be my parents whenever somebody comes to the house, and I let them live here for free. I tell them I was born fabulously wealthy, and was privately tutored until I was sixteen. Now, I just want to spend a couple of years seeing what it’s like to live a normal life. They seem to buy the romance of it and don’t ask any questions. I was turned when I was just eighteen, and I had a bit of a babyface then, so easily look like I should be a senior in high school.

I’m just about to get into my car when I see the motorcycle sitting off to the side. After waking up poorly, I decide that taking my first ride of the year sounds perfect. I’d put the bike up properly back in September, and the garage is heated, so it’s just a couple minutes work to get her ready to ride. I put on my leathers, a thick face mask, and a heavy cap, all of which will protect me from both the chill wind and the sun. I mount up and hit the starter, and the engine rumbles to life.

I realize now just how much I’ve been missing the old beast while it slept through the winter. Getting to ride is one of the things that gets me through the bright summer months.

I glance at my watch quick, and see that I’m running late. Normally not a problem, but I am hoping to get to school extra early today. It means I have to step it up on the ride in, even though the roads aren’t completely clean yet. I pull out of the driveway and onto the highway, smoothly

carving through the curves as I climb out of the valley. I'm making decent time when I see a familiar car up ahead – It's Ivy Sparks. I have to get to school before she does.

I know that there are only two passing zones between us and the school, and one is coming up soon. I open up the throttle, and pull up right behind Ivy's little blue Honda. She's a very, very careful driver, like a lot of people her age that have only been driving for a year or so, and admit to themselves they're not good at it yet. You can't really say that Stokers Mill has a rush hour, just a couple times of day when there's actual traffic on the roads. There are just enough oncoming cars that I know I'm going to have to jump into any opening I get when we hit the passing zone around this next curve. I rev the engine and drop down a gear, getting ready to accelerate as soon as I see my chance…

And there it is, a big dual-wheel pickup with a decent gap behind it. The very moment it's past me, I roll the throttle all the way back, and the bike leaps forward. I know I've got to run hard to get past Ivy before that next car gets around the blind curve ahead. I look to my right, and see her at the wheel, hands very precisely where they should be on the steering wheel, eyes dashing between me and the road ahead. I can't help but slow down just a bit, to admire her as I go by.

Then she mashes the brakes. I snap my attention forward and see the oncoming car is much closer than I'd expected it to be. I don't even have time to be thankful that Ivy is rapidly decelerating, giving me a gap to slide into. I look left as the oncoming car blurs past, catching a flash of the driver, head down, eyes on the phone in his hand. He never would have seen me until I went through his windshield.

I give Ivy a little wave of thanks, a kind of salute that I picked up from a friend in a jazz club back in the 20s, to let her know I appreciate her help

in not crashing.

I spit out some pretty unpleasant language at the guy, and briefly consider suspending my policy of not feeding on humans, just for him. But it's my first day on the bike in months, and it doesn't take long for the cold wind and the visceral thumping of the engine beneath me, and a few more long, sweeping curves to lift my spirits back up.

By the time I get to the school, I'm feeling one with the machine, and can't help but dance with it a little as I look for a parking space, dodging here, weaving there, leaning through curves tight enough that I scrape the foot pegs on the ground,

The hallways are mostly empty once I get inside. Less than half the students have arrived, and most of them have long been in the habit of ignoring me. Stokers Mill seems like a very nice town filled with very nice people, but in some ways, it is as bad as a vampire clan – closed off to outsiders unless and until they can find some way to prove themselves. I haven't yet figured out what I could give them that they would want, though, so I remain isolated in their midst. Only Ivy has ever shown me any genuine kindness, and even that in small gestures here and there, when she's apart from her many friends.

It's not just those little glimpses of acceptance that Ivy gives me that make me stop at her locker and reach into my jacket for a folded, sealed piece of paper. There's something more than that to her. Something that draws me to her, that makes me unable to look away when she's near me – to the point where I'd nearly ruined my bike and somebody else's car just twenty minutes earlier. I look at the paper in my hand. It, in its way, lays my feelings out for her. I stand there pondering whether I should slip it through the vents in her locker door, when I realize that I'm just standing there in

front of it like an idiot. Sooner or later, somebody is going to notice me and wonder what I'm doing.

'Well,' I tell myself. 'Nothing else to do but to do it.' I slip the paper into her locker, and then quickly walk down the hallway to my own. It takes me a couple of tries to get the books I won't need until afternoon, and all of my riding gear inside. Like all vampires, there is something about seeing my own reflection that makes me profoundly uncomfortable, so I don't have a mirror inside my locker door. I do carry a comb, though, and do the best I can to smooth out my hair after the ride. Just as I'm finishing, the first bell rings. I start to make my way from my locker, at the back of the school, to my first class all the way at the front.

I see Ivy in the flow of students heading deeper into the school. I smile and wave at her again. Instead of the little nod and nice smile she usually gives me, her face twists in anger. Her green eyes, normally so bright, like two grand emeralds, go cold.

"Ben!" she says. "That was not funny. You scared me to death out there."

I try to start an apology, but Carl, Kate, and Nathan all step right up to me. I have to take a step back to keep from being knocked over by Carl.

"Whatever you're about to say, don't," he says. "You want to be a jackass in class or at lunch or in the hallway, fine. But never, never, ever mess with Ivy on the road, or we're going to have some real problems."

Every eye in the hallway feels like it's on Carl and me.

"Carl," Ivy says. "He doesn't know. Let it be."

I've known since the very first time I saw him that Carl is a thrope – a lycanthrope, or werewolf. At this moment, he's furious at me. I don't even need to see the expression on his face, or the way he actually starts to grow

a little bit taller and broader. I can smell it on him, the wolf musk. All of the hair on his head gets a little bit coarser and starts trying to stand up.

I can tell that he was born into his blood and not recently infected. It usually takes years to control the transformation well enough to let it just barely start, then stop it. A mortal would be terrified right now. A younger vampire than me might, too. But I've fought in two Great Wars, one against other men, one against his kind. I've taken pelts. But it won't do to let that show right now. I'm the outsider in Stokers Mill. I have to let the local boy win.

"Ok," I say, as contrite as I can. "Never again." I step away.

Ivy comes up to Carl. "Let it be," she whispers.

He exhales, and I see him reverse the partial transformation, shrink back into himself.

"Ms. Sparks," I say, solemnly. "My most sincere apology for my behavior earlier today. I let the spirit of the day infect me without regard for the safety of others on the road. It was inexcusable."

Ivy just shakes her head at me and turns away. I realize that I'd really hurt her earlier, somehow caused genuine and deep pain. I want to call out to her, beg her forgiveness again, but I don't. I have crossed a line with her, and I can't uncross it. I can only make sure I never cross it again.

And then I remember the poem in her locker. Of all of the days I could have opened myself up like that, I chose today. I halfway follow her, trying to stay out of sight. The second bell has already rung, so she doesn't have much time to dwell. I see her throw her coat and a couple of books in, pull a few out, and just as she's shutting the door, she notices something, but it's too late. She runs off to class. I decide I'm already late to my first class, so I go to her locker, and suddenly decide I need to tie my shoe. As I crouch down pass by the lower vents of the locker door, I can smell the paper and

the sealing wax. The note is still inside, at least. But there's no way for me to get it out.

At least I have a couple of hours reprieve.

Right at the beginning of lunch, I make sure to pick a route to the cafeteria that will take me past her locker again. I see her open it up, and reach directly for something down low. She comes up with my note. She looks more curious than anything as she looks around, then tucks the note into one of her books and walks off, away from the cafeteria. I keep my distance as I follow her, down to the band room, and then into a hallway behind it that I've never noticed before.

I find that if I'm careful, I can stand behind a coat rack with a few jackets on it, and barely see her without being seen myself. She breaks the seal on the ribbon, and unties it, unfolds the note, reads it. I watch her as best I can, catching just glimpses of her facial expression. First, she seems bewildered. She leans back against the wall and slides down it. Once she's sitting, she reads it again, and again. I see many things flash across her face in the little glimpses I catch, and none of them seem to be anger. Finally, I hear a little laugh escape her. Not of mockery or derision, though. And a smile lingers on her face afterwards.

I don't know how exactly the poem I wrote affects her, but I'm at least a little bit optimistic that I've regained her favor as I carefully, silently, back away down the hallway and around the corner.

Chapter Three

Carl Wilson

I spend the rest of the day itching. It's a side effect of the transformation. Unfortunately, even a partial transformation comes with a full dose of that side effect. There's a part of me that wishes I would have gone full wolf on Ben, to make sure he knew full well what he was messing with, that Ivy is part of my personal pack and off limits to the likes of him. If I'm going to itch all day, might as well earn it, right? But I know that's the wolf blood talking – the part of my nature that drives on pure impulse and aggression. It will always choose the path that leads to the most bloodshed, if I let it.

But there are so many reasons to not let the wolf out. The most obvious, of course, being that we never, ever show our true selves to the pinkies. We've gone for centuries without them realizing how many of us walk among them. Me transforming right in the middle of a school would have single handedly destroyed all of that work by countless of my ancestors, and have only ended in me being hunted down and torn to shreds by morning.

Then there's the Truce between us and the zombies. No matter how many of my problems with Ben, and his sniffing around Ivy, are personal, for me to tangle with him would be a violation of the Truce. It could be one

pebble in an avalanche of violations that could restart the Great War. I lost way too much to the war to risk that. Way, way too much.

I had to content myself with showing him just enough to hope he'd back off instead of starting a fight with me. I can only hope that he also values the Truce and is terrified of breaking it. Maybe that will get him to back off from Ivy, go find some other pinkie somewhere else to mope around with his fashionable immortal ennui.

Showering up after gym class only makes the itch worse, but there's no way I can skip it after working out. Another side effect of the wolf blood is that my scent can be quite strong for a while after any degree of transformation. Not bad, like a dirty, wet dog, but still very obvious. I suffer through my last class of the day, a physics class where we sit at our desks and learn equations instead of getting to move around doing some lab work. I try my hardest to not fidget around while I stare at the clock, willing the minute hand to move on and the bell to ring.

When it finally does, I'm so restless that I nearly leap up out of my seat. It feels so good to just be able to move as I walk down the hallway toward my locker. I grab the couple of books I'll need for tonight's homework and head out of the building. My bloodline descends from the great alpine wolves of old, so I am extraordinarily tolerant of cold. Where everybody else in the school had brought out their lightweight jackets that morning for school, I'd stepped out with just a lumberjack shirt and a cap.

As soon as I step out of the building into the sunlight, the first thing I notice is Ben, the only one bundled up hiding from the sun, and not throwing open his coat and looking up to face the sky. And he's walking with Ivy. I wonder what could possibly have happened that they're just about shoulder-to-shoulder, speaking quietly together. After she had been so

angry at him this morning, how she backed me up when I stepped at him, how could that zombie have possibly redeemed himself?

I come up behind them, wedging myself right between, and I hook Ivy's arm in mine. They're both taken enough by surprise that he doesn't protest and she just comes along with me.

"What is going on?" I ask Ivy.

"Nothing that is any of your business!" she says.

I look back over my shoulder at Ben. He's got his leather jacket zipped all the way up, his oversized sunglasses on, cap pulled down over his ears, and his facemask bunched up around his neck. He looks positively ridiculous, hiding his precious zombie skin from the mean old sun. Where Ivy wears her paleness with grace, Ben just looks like somebody has sucked all of his blood out, instead of the other way around.

"That guy was a complete ass to you this morning. To anybody that got too close to him and that overblown bike of his, in fact. He doesn't actually think about anybody, you know. He's just here for himself and nobody else." I wanted to add, 'Like all zombies,' but that would just get her asking too many of the wrong questions. But I knew Ben's type of zombie. Oh so weary of the world, and oh so 'Woe is me!'

"He apologized," Ivy says.

"I saw it. It wasn't very sincere."

"Carl!" Ivy says, jerking her arm away from me. "I know you don't like him, but he meant it."

"You didn't seem to believe it, either," I say.

"I was still freshly angry this morning. And he was in the middle of another apology when you just plowed in between us. He really does feel bad for what he did this morning."

I am about to say something else, when she interrupts me. “Besides, he really doesn’t know about my parents and what happened, so he doesn’t know just how people driving crazy around me on these mountain roads really affects me. Now he knows, and he’s going to do better. So like I said, Carl, none of your business.”

“You don’t see how cold he is? How little he cares about people, how he keeps himself separate from everybody? That kid is bad, bad news, Ivy.”

We get to her car. By force of habit, I walk around to the passenger side. “If I really needed a new dad, Carl, it wouldn’t be you,” Ivy says. “I get that we’re a lot alike, and you’ve been the best brother I always wish I’d had, but lay off on Ben. I don’t need you to protect me from him, because he’s not going to hurt me. He’s just a lonely guy that’s a little bit odd, and he just needs a friend.”

“There is an entire school full of friends he could make if he’d just stop being such a creep and a loner. And half of those potential friends are guys, if he’d just make an effort.”

I realize I’ve just pushed it too far. I just started pushing the conversation to one we’ve had many times before. She thinks I’m jealous of Ben because I want to be her boyfriend, and he’s a threat to that. That’s not entirely false, but with that zombie, it’s more than him taking an affection that she’ll never feel for me anyway. I have good reason to not trust zombies, but there’s something about Ben that really smells off. There’s more to him and his attraction to her than just a beautiful woman having caught his eye. He wants way more than that from her.

Ivy opens her door, but doesn’t hit the switch to unlock the rest. “Check with Grandma to see if she wants you to come to dinner tonight,” she says, getting in and slamming the door behind her.

I always join her and Grandma for dinner when she gets home from a trip out east, typically catch a ride with Ivy after school. Obviously, tonight I'm walking home and driving myself over. It's probably for the better, considering how upset she is at me, and how she thinks this is all because I have a crush on her. Spending thirty minutes in a small car together isn't going to improve things. She backs out of her parking space and leaves the lot driving as angry as the world's most cautious and considerate motorist possibly can.

There's a shortcut to my house from the school that cuts two miles of highway switchbacks off of the trip, in exchange for climbing a steep, wooded slope. Even though I have a car, I like the trail enough that I usually only drive to school if the weather is truly terrible, or I have to go to town afterwards. I step inside the treeline, and duck under the vine and moss-covered trunk of a fallen tree. I'm really upset right now, and itching anyways. There's always been one easy cure for that. I strip naked, stuff my clothes and boots into my backpack. I loosen the shoulder straps on the backpack all the way and put it on, clasping the waist belt and the replacement chest strap I'd made out of much heavier material than the original.

I let a little growl escape my human throat, feeling the sound of it get deeper and more lupine, coming from a place deeper in my throat and resonating through my chest. I drop to all fours and growl again, releasing my hold on the wolf, letting it into my bloodstream, and from there, feeling it spread into every part of my being.

The color washes out of my vision, things become softer, more blurred, but I can also see more clearly into the dark areas of the woods around me. Whiskers sprout out of my face, and I feel every movement of the air in them. My nostrils fill with a riot of smells – the damp earth below me, still

mostly dormant after winter. The slowly rotting wood of the tree I'm sheltered under. The reek of burning gasoline and diesel fuel waft in from the road just a few dozen yards away. I smell deer and birds and possum around me, small rodents too insignificant to rouse my appetite, the fake stink of scented soap clinging to a passer-by from their shower. I sniff again, and catch the nice musk of deer again. My mouth starts to water.

As the transformation continues to take hold, I roll my shoulders and twist my torso, to make sure the backpack is in the right position. By the time the wolf has taken over completely, my hands have been replaced by heavy paws with thick, strong claws. My first instinct is to try and shake that human thing, filled with the clothes that my weak, pinkie form must wear, off me. I try to claw at it, but can't quite twist my legs into the right positions to get a solid grasp on it. The annoyance and distraction of it actually keep the wolf from completely taking me over, giving my human self a presence in my mind that allows me to constrain my wildest nature. Only if I suffer physical harm or experience some intense emotion do I risk ceding complete control to the wolf.

I'm tempted to go for the deer I smell, but it's still daytime, and once on the hunt, I struggle to control the wolf. The chances of flushing the deer out into the open or across the highway during daylight hours is too great. I try to appease the wolf by letting it run free and hard up the wooded slope, making great leaps as I zig-zag across the bedrock that juts out through the thin soil and leaf litter. Every time we come to a highway, I skulk down in a thicket and wait for all traffic to be clear before I sprint across the road and into the woods on the other side.

The backyard of my house is surrounded by a solid wooden fence, but there's one place, right at the back of it, where there's a gap beneath the boards. I creep under that, careful to not snag the backpack, and crawl to the

cellar door. I keep a stout rope tied to it that I'm able to grab it in my teeth and pull it to open it up. Once I'm at the bottom of the stairs, I curl up and spend a minute coaxing the wolf back from me. I close my eyes and feel my shape shift, feel the hairs recede back under my skin. As always, I find myself disoriented as my senses of smell and hearing fade back to their human limitations. That's why I keep my eyes closed during the transformation back if I can – the sudden riot of sharp colors is too much to take at the same time the other two senses are so sharply curtailed.

I pull the heavy cellar door above me shut, and fish the basement door key out of my backpack. Right inside is a shower for those times I come back home muddy or bloody.

Two hours later, I arrive at Grandma's house. Fortunately, Ivy's good nature has returned by the time I arrive. We give each other a huge hug. "Everything good?" I ask.

"Everything's good," she says.

For all the time we've known each other, if we've ever parted mad at each other, 'Everything's good,' has been our greeting the next time we see each other.

It pains me to sully that little ritual by lying to her. Everything is not good, won't be good as long as Ben is in the scene, but I decide to let it rest for now. I hope that he'll show his true nature again, maybe a few more times, but enough to let her know how bad he is for her and get her to push him away herself. Our conversation today told me pretty clearly that I can't protect her from Ben by putting myself between them. But patience isn't really a strong suit for werewolves. We're creatures of action.

I wait until after dinner, when Ivy goes to the den to practice piano. Grandma knows that something happened between Ivy and me, so she takes two beers from the fridge. We sit at the kitchen table together, listening to

Ivy's gentle music. Grandma waits me out, sipping at her beer, until I can't hold it in anymore and I tell her about what happened with Ben.

"You shouldn't have let the wolf growl at Ben," is the first thing Grandma says. "Now that he knows, it's going to change everything. He's going to treat you differently, both when Ivy is present and when she isn't."

"I know," I say. I consider making some excuses, but I know that Grandma won't have any of it. She's always pushed me to keep the wolf on a shorter leash than I do, always pushed me to think farther ahead that I usually do.

"The Great War is over, Carl," Grandma says. "But the need to think two steps ahead is just as vital for your survival now as it was then. There is a Truce now, but it was a long war, and it will only take a few small errors to break the peace and bring you right back to where you were."

"I know," I say. "I just can't stand the thought of that zombie getting his teeth into her."

"Don't call them that. You need to respect them to respect the truce."

"I respect 'them'," I say. "I don't respect him."

"Disrespect him with better language, then," Grandma says. "You've already figured out that the more you push them apart, the more Ivy is going to push at you. Swallow it when you're around him. You really want Ivy to be alright tomorrow, mind your behavior today."

I take a drink of beer to try and collect my thoughts. Grandma has said her piece, and she's waiting me out again. I know this silence. She wants me to figure something out. I replay that moment with Ben this morning, everything about it. I recall my own actions, and Ben's responses. I suddenly recall a certain look on his face when I made the final step in at him, looking down on him from my enhanced height. It was a very brief, smug flash of victory. In that moment, Ben realized that he'd actually won

the confrontation. I listen to Ivy's playing from the other room. She's in the middle of a song, which means it's at least a couple of minutes before she'll be getting up from the piano.

"So, he knows. About me," I tell Grandma. "He knows a secret about me that I can never tell Ivy. Which means he can start planting it in her ear that I hide something from her."

Grandma lifts her bottle of beer and holds it out toward me, offering a toast. I clink my bottle against hers. "Now you understand why you need to think ahead, don't you?"

I throw my head back and groan and run my fingers through my hair. Grandma is right. The little victory I thought I'd won today turned out to be a loss in many ways. Ben had bested me at a game I didn't know I was even playing yet. The wolf whispers that ripping his throat out would end the game, on my terms, tonight.

"I know what you're thinking," Grandma says. "You touch Ben, they'll take it out on Ivy."

Grandma just leaves it unspoken that if any harm comes to Ivy because of my action, that her vengeance on me will be harsh and swift.

"What do I do?" I ask her.

"The hardest route, but also the safest, is to be the better man. Which means you don't try to compete with Ben. You compete against yourself to show Ivy that you are the best one for her. Better than Ben isn't going to cut it. Best possible choice is all that will work."

I sigh again. Ivy's song is just about at an end. "What do you think I've been trying to do since the day I met her?"

"Finish that," Grandma says, gesturing at my beer.

I quickly drain it and put the empty into the recycling bin as quiet as I can, just before Ivy comes into the room. "Lovely," I tell her.

“That’s what I miss most about being on the road,” Grandma says.

Ivy curtsies for us before she sits back down at the table. She looks at the half-full beer in Grandma’s hand and at the little condensation ring on the coaster in front of me. She winks at me to let me know that I’ve been busted.

We chat for a little while longer, about Grandma’s trip and about the first real day of spring in Stokers Mill, until Ivy pushes her chair back to let us know that she’s heading upstairs for the night.

“I should get going,” I say, pushing my own chair back.

“Unless Ivy would like you to spend the night, perhaps?” She cocks an eyebrow at her.

She gives her a slightly sour look. She’s almost as tired of her trying to nudge us into a relationship as she is of my wishing she’d see me as something different than her big puppy.

Before she can open her mouth, I say, “No, that’s alright. I should get home to my own bed. Good night, Ivy,” I say, opening my arms to invite a hug.

She accepts, and we share a short embrace. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says, heading toward the stairs.

I bid Grandma a good night as well. There’s a look on her face that tells me deflecting her invite to spend the night so Ivy didn’t have to is exactly what I should have done.

If only I had figured that out a couple of years ago.

Chapter Four

Nathan Marsh

The standoff between Ben and Carl has been bothering me for quite some time now. I have no doubt that they have figured each other out – that is probably the only thing that is keeping the two of them from coming to blows with each other. I just hope that they continue to keep their hands off of each other. They both seem to respect the Truce, but males tend to forget civility very easily when there is a woman between them.

The unfortunate thing is that, because of Ivy, neither of the two is going to step away. It is said that no witch can spell ‘coincidence’. There is a reason why both of these men have come to know Ivy. I just wish I knew what that reason was.

Of course, there is also some reason why I have come to know Ivy, and I have not figured that out, either. Why a vampire, a werewolf and I have all caught the attention and some sort of affection of Ivy Sparks is quite the puzzle, and if I had any need of sleep, it would certainly keep me up nights.

I go out after dark to the woods near Ivy’s home, to the circle she keeps out there. Ten gray stones — five dark, five light – all in a circle, with a small depression dug in the center. Even without my natural abilities to sniff out magic, I would be able to tell she’d been by within the last hour or so.

Her grandmother's line tends to burn amber and clove as the base of their incense blends, and the sharp scent remains in the cool, still air. Mixed in with that are some other herbs that I know mortals associate with divination.

I step closer to the ring of stones, and see that the hollow in the center of the circle is dry. So despite the divination herbs, she was not scrying. I would hazard a guess that our Ivy also has the matter of Carl and Ben on her mind.

I take a step closer to the stones that mark her circle, and I get a little twinge in my gut. Not unlike nausea, but also not exactly the same. I find myself having to really want to come in closer to take another step toward the stones. The young lady is growing stronger in her power by the day, if I can still feel the presence of her general protective circle around her space after her spell has ended.

A short walk takes me to where the trees end at the edge of her yard. Emily, her grandmother, has both the power and skill to keep me off the property entirely, but we've known each other for a very long time, and from years of working together have built a solid friendship. This lets me cross the property line at will, though Emily still feels it when I do so.

As I approach the house, I can see that Ivy is upstairs asleep, while Emily sits in her chair in the den, watching me walk across the yard. I come in through the kitchen door – the one friends and family use, not the front door that strangers go to – and join her in the recliner next to hers. I touch the little end table between us, and a glass of wine appears. Emily and I may be friends, but she is still very fastidious and cautious. She's never once offered me food or drink, or accepted any from me.

"Carl's been here," I say.

"Yes. Did you see what happened at school?"

I give her my account of what went down between the two boys. She nods in satisfaction, presumably because Carl's version mostly agrees with mine. "Life would be much easier if Ben would just move on," she says after some thought and a drink of beer.

"He isn't going to," I say.

"Can you help him along?"

I look at Emily, but she is careful to keep her eyes on her yard, instead of looking back at me. She normally speaks very plainly, and not in inference or suggestion. Especially not when she's talking to me. She knows the danger in being ambiguous with my kind.

If she's not going to clarify, I will need to do it for her. "Two vampires slain out here in three months would be too much for them to ignore, or to let go unchallenged."

"It doesn't have to happen in my woods, like the other one," Emily says.

"They'd both have my mark on them."

"They know better than to go after you. And with Ben, you'd be doing them a favor."

I find I do not like where this conversation is going.

"If you want me to remove a problem for you, you are going to need to do a proper binding and command," I tell her.

She finally looks at me. "Oh, sorry, Nathan. Just letting my mind wander out loud."

"Good," I say. "In all of the time you've known me, you've never sent me out to kill anybody. I'm glad that you're not going to start now."

"What is it about Ben that bothers you?"

"Do you need to ask?"

“No,” I say. “He’s captured our Ivy’s heart in a way that nobody else ever has. Not any of the local boys – even the good ones, and not Carl.”

“Nor you,” Emily says, smiling a little bit at me.

“Nor me,” I have to admit. “Though, I would think you would rather have her cavorting with a hundred-year-old vampire than with me.”

“It isn’t about your ages. It’s about who you are.”

“Have you even met Mr. Wake?” I ask. The last time she and I had talked about him, she had not even seen the man.

“Not yet. But I am uncomfortable with how quickly Ivy has taken to him. I don’t trust that he isn’t using any of his power to influence her feelings toward him. I know you haven’t. You’ve always tried to win her affection on your own merits, and I can respect that.”

“It would be troubling if Ben were influencing her,” I say. “With the power she has already, he could do a tremendous amount of damage to her.”

“And she would then do a great amount of damage to those around her.”

“But I think it best for me to not interfere with him, unless we can prove for sure that he is influencing her affection,” I say.

Emily frowns at me.

“You know it to be true,’ I say. “Stepping between them will only strengthen their attraction to each other. Else you would have done something yourself already.”

“I know that I would make a mess of it if I tried,” Emily says. “Ivy still thinks of me as a shriveled old prude and resists any attempts I’ve ever made at giving her advice on relationships or more personal matters.”

“If only she knew,” I say.

Emily laughs. “It’s better that she not know. Nobody likes to think of their grandmothers as sexual beings. But I was hoping there was some way

you could distract Ben without him or Ivy knowing it was coming from either of us."

"Intent," I say. "Intent is always clear for those who know how to look for it. And one of those two has survived the Great War and the clan wars for a century, and the other is your granddaughter. There is no way we could hide our involvement from either of them."

"So are we back to me binding you?" Emily asks, with a little laugh.

"Do not make jokes about such things," I tell her.

The next morning. I come into school on my own. Kate has a dentist appointment, so she is not sitting on the front steps with me when Carl arrives and sits down next to me.

"Nathan," he says.

I nod to him and offer him my bag of granola. I can tell how distracted he is by the fact that he actually takes some and pops it in his mouth. Normally, being almost exclusively a meat eater, he scowls at me offering him 'wood chips and hamster food'.

I have learned Carl's rhythms over time. I let him take another handful of my breakfast and wait for him to talk.

"I really shouldn't have threatened Ben yesterday," he says, frowning at me and pushing the granola away from him.

"But you did," I say. "And people liked it."

"I know. But it's not what I want them to like about me," Carl says. "I mean, yeah, I'm big and strong, and always there for somebody that needs some help." He balls up one of his hands into a fist and flexes a bit. "You know."

Over the years he's been in town, Carl has stood down every bully in the school at Stokers Mill, taken care of a couple of boys who've roughed up their girlfriends, and has probably helped half the school cut wood,

move earth, haul furniture, or anything else that just requires some raw muscle. Even he and I had it out once, a couple of years ago when I had a hard time keeping my nature contained, and was, quite frankly, a bit of an ass to just about everybody. I had pushed things too far, offended too many people close to him, so Carl ambushed me on the way home from school one day and pounded the tar out of me.

The next day, when he saw me walking up to the building, he gave me a tentative wave. The kind that asked if we were cool, or if he needed to meet me after school again. I looked him in the eye when I waved back and nodded, and that seemed to settle things for him. He has never mentioned it since, nor have I, and we are probably stronger friends now than we were before.

I would wonder about his regrets over it, but for the Truce. Carl dealt with Ben in the way that is most natural for him, but it was the wrong way under the circumstances. It is more than that, though.

“Ivy is pretty sweet on Ben,” I say.

Without thinking, Carl grabs another handful of my granola and tosses it into his mouth. “Everybody liked what I did yesterday, except Ivy.”

“At least you stuck to just words instead of laying him flat out on the floor.”

“Oh, I wanted to,” Carl says. He balls his fist again, briefly, then very self-consciously relaxes it. “Lots of reasons why it’s a good thing I didn’t. But I embarrassed myself in front of Ivy. That’s the one that hurts.”

“She was upset at him herself. Maybe the restraint you did show will matter to her. Look,” I say, pointing to Ivy walking toward us.

She comes up and sits down next to me, reaching around my back to touch Carl’s shoulder quick.

“How are you two this morning,” she asks, looking more at him than at me.

I cannot completely figure out the look on her face, her body language. She is clearly interested in how Carl is, but also has set herself with my body in between them. I suspect that her working in her circle last night had a lot to do with Carl, but that she did not find any clarity.

“Sorry about yesterday,” Carl says.

“About time you apologized for that,” Ivy tells him. She tries to make her tone sharp, but I can feel some softness in it.

“You know I’m not always all that swift on these things,” Carl tells her.

“I know.”

All three of us look to the parking lot, as we hear Ben’s motorcycle pull in. Carl looks to Ivy, who very carefully keeps her eyes off of Ben as he parks the bike and locks his helmet to it, still keeping his dark glasses and scarf on. For his part, Ben needs only a glance at the three of us to decide to just walk straight into the building instead of approaching.

I keep an eye on Ivy as he walks past, carefully watching where she is looking. By the time Ben passes us, I am greatly relieved to see that she had just given him a quick glance and a small smile, and that was it. If Ben had been using his powers to influence her, she would have had to work to keep her eyes off of him. I still don’t have to like him, or his attention for her.

“Are we still on for tonight?” I ask Ivy, to break out of that line of thought.

“You and Kate, yes? Grandma left way more food than I’d ever eat while she’s gone. Carl, you’re welcome, too, for dinner.”

“No thanks,” he says. “Working late tonight, and I have been slacking pretty hard on homework.”

“You sure?” Ivy asks, reaching around me again, to poke him playfully in the ribs. She has a smile on her face, but it still looks conflicted, as if she both does and does not wish him to take her up on the invitation.

“I’m sure,” Carl says. “Maybe tomorrow night, if I get caught up some tonight.”

“We can make sure you study,” I tell him.

“Please, Nathan. Kate, Ivy, and you together? There’s no way the three of you will be able to focus on keeping me focused. Remember the last time we all hung out and Grandma didn’t leave us food? Took us what, ten minutes to figure out what we wanted from ‘Nics, and more than two hours to actually place the order?”

I remember that night well. Carl does have a point. When the four of us get together, there is a certain energy that builds up and does a whole lot of going nowhere very fast.

“We need to do that again some time,” Ivy says, shouldering me right into Carl.

“I’ll call ‘Nics before I leave my house.”

“Good call,” Ivy says.

“Well, me and food. You know how it goes,” Carl laughs, playfully butting me with his shoulder hard enough that I almost knock Ivy over.

“How did I end up in the middle of this?” I stand up quickly, just in time to miss Ivy trying to shove me back at Carl. She loses her balance and ends up with her head in his lap. I think she lingers there just a little longer than she thinks she intends to before getting back up. “Come on,” I say. “The bell is about to ring.”

Chapter Five

Ivy Sparks

For the hundredth time, I type ‘bwake@students.smshs.edu’ into the address line. For the hundredth time, I erase it. But I don’t erase the body of the email itself. I save it back to my drafts folder and look up. Kate, Nathan, and I are up in my room on a stormy Friday night. We weren’t planning on making it a sleepover, but when a strong wind and heavy rain rolled down the mountainside into the valley, the other two decided to not brave the twisty roads home. With all of the soil in the area still sodden from snowmelt, the storm is certain to cause at least a few mud slicks across the dark, wet roads.

I open the email back up again. Type bwake@students.smshs.edu again. Erase it again. One hundred and one times.

“What are you so focused on,” Nathan asks Kate.

I see that Kate is even more wrapped up in her phone than I am. She seems to be actually writing something instead of just pointlessly dithering. The smile on her face, though, the way that she’s curling up her toes as she lies on her stomach, feet up in the air, tells me everything I need to know. “You’re chatting with Steve…” I say.

She blushes. A lot.

“Ooooooh…” Nathan says, giving her a huge smile.

Kate buries her face in a pillow. It appears to be official. Kate is the first of the three of us to have had sex.

“Last night?” I ask.

“This morning,” she says, with a huge smile on her face.

“At the dentist office?” That was supposedly the reason she didn’t get to school until 10:30 today.

“The dentist cancelled on me at the last minute. And since I already had the tardy excuse and my parents were at work, it didn’t take much to convince Steve to skip out of his first few classes.”

We both look at her incredulously.

“Anyways, he’s got detention tomorrow and Monday now.”

“I hope it was worth it for him,” Nathan says.

“The last half hour has been him asking when he can do it again,” Kate says, waving her phone at us.

“How was it for you?” Nathan asks.

“Oh, how do I even describe it? It was like more than I expected and less. It was daytime, so my bedroom was bright and could see everything. I was more than a little self-conscious completely naked in front of him for the first time like that. In good light, too! And on the other hand, he was just so sexy. And I know I’m not his first, so he was a lot more relaxed about it. Completely unashamed, totally casual about me seeing him. But the look on his face when I first turned around after getting undressed. It was as if he’d never seen anything so beautiful before. But then when we were actually doing it, I kept thinking I was going to bust out laughing at him, because it just… It just seemed like we must have looked so ridiculous.”

I can’t help it. I really can’t. I burst out giggling at the mental image of her trying to keep a straight face while going at it with Steve. That gets Nathan going.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “We shouldn’t laugh at you.”

“It’s Ok,” Kate says. “I mean, it is kind of funny now that I think about it.”

We all collapse into another fit of laughter. When we stop to catch our breath, Nathan asks. “Was it good, though?”

Kate bites her lower lip and grins like you wouldn’t believe. “A-plus-plus-plus. Eleven of ten stars. Did bang again.”

“You did it twice this morning?” I ask.

She nods, bright-eyed, kicking her feet in the air above her.

“You guys were careful, though, right?” Nathan asks.

“Steve is a perfect gentleman on that count,” Kate says, then sighs. I know that she hates being the center of attention, so I’m not surprised when she deflects the conversation. “How about you, Ivy? I never suspected I’d give up the V-card before you.”

“Oh, you know,” I say, shaking my head. “I haven’t found my Steve yet.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see a look on Nathan’s face, as if he wants to remind me of how attractive he finds me, but doesn’t want to be disappointed. I’m glad he holds his tongue – he’s a rather handsome and wonderful man, despite his rough edges, but I don’t really think he moves me in that way.

“What about Carl? You’ve been texting him all night, haven’t you?” Kate asks.

I suddenly become very aware that my phone is laying on the floor right in the middle of the three of us. I am so thankful for my habit of always clearing back to the home screen before I set it down. “You realize that Carl thinks of my grandma as his.”

“Yeah, but he certainly doesn’t think of you that way,” Kate says.

“Well,” I say, wincing a little bit. Ever since Grandma got home the other night Carl has somehow kept his attraction for me out of sight, and I’ve really liked it that way. The last thing I need right now is for Kate and Nathan to be bringing it up again. “He just doesn’t light that particular fire for me.”

“For as much of a hard time as we give him, he really is a good guy,” Nathan says, still with that winsome look on his face.

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The next morning, I drive Kate to school, following Nathan in his car. Part of life in Stokers Mill is that you always keep an outfit or two at your best friends’ houses, because you never know when the weather is going to keep you there overnight.

Ben is on my mind – has been on my mind nonstop since the night before, and the night before that, and the night before that. Pretty much back to when I read that poem he left me in my locker. Hearing Kate tell us about her first time with Steve, I’m definitely feeling a particular fire I’ve never felt before. The one that Carl and Nathan have never really lit for me, the one that no other boy has ever kindled. Not even the couple that I’ve made out with. I guess that’s why Kate got to be the first of us to go all the way. It’s only in the past twenty four hours that I’ve felt that delicious urgency inside of me. Perhaps it was just sleeping until I was able to attach it to a particular name?

Ben Wake, what have you done to me?

As if thinking his name summoned him, I hear the rumble of his bike. I look into my rear view mirror and see him behind me, approaching at a much more respectful rate than on our first encounter on the road. I also notice that we’re at almost the exact same place, just a couple of curves shy of the passing zone where he’d almost gotten himself killed.

“Hey!” Kate says. “What’s on your mind?”

“Sorry,” I say, taking another glance into my mirror at what’s on my mind. “Nothing much.”

Kate side-eyes me and shakes her head ever so slightly. Her way of telling me she knows I’m lying since we were in elementary school.

“Romance,” I say.

She smiles and nods.

“Just wondering why I’ve never met anybody that moves me the way Steve moves you.”

“Probably because he doesn’t live in Stokers Mill,” she says. “Five months from now, you’ll be at college in San Diego. A lot more options there than here.”

I look into my mirror again. Ben gives me his little twisty salute. “Maybe,” I say.

I am so relieved that Kate doesn’t look behind us to see who is back there. When we arrive at school, Steve wastes no time intercepting Kate. Nathan and I try give him that look that lets him know we know, but he never notices. He only has eyes for Kate. The way he takes one finger and tenderly brushes a stray lock of hair from her cheek as he goes in for the kiss gives my heart a little flutter.

A week ago, that moment of tenderness would have made me wonder what was wrong with me, that I’d never yet wanted that with someone else. This morning, it makes me turn my head to look for Ben. I catch sight of him just walking away from his bike. I had always considered black leather gear to be the ultimate biker uniform, the epitome of masculinity. It always conjures up images of a man’s man, tall, broad-shouldered and muscular with graying goatees.

Ben is dressed in an oxblood leather jacket and medium brown chaps, and wears a maroon stocking cap and matching scarf to keep his head and face warm. The pairing of earthy brown with deep and rich reddish shades gives him a certain elegance that is still fundamentally male. It makes the Hells Angel tough guy look almost seem like a parody of itself. I take a moment to imagine what that leather would smell like up close.

Carl appearing in my peripheral vision breaks me out of my budding little fantasy.

“This punk got busted yesterday,” Carl says, pointing at Steve as he walks up to us, “and now I have cover for him tonight instead of raiding.” Carl and Steve both worked at the local mom and pop hardware store.

“Sorry, Dawg. I told you, I really overslept,” Steve says.

“Up too late the night before chatting with this one, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“You owe me,” Carl says, just as the first bell rings.

At lunch, I finally get caught with my eyes on Ben. My mind is wandering, and apparently there’s no doubt where it’s gone. “Ivy! No,” Kate says.

“What?” Nathan asks.

“She’s seriously checking out Ben.”

“I am not!” I say.

“I think Kate’s right,” Nathan says. “It’s all over your face.”

“Look,” I say, exasperated. “He’s got a nice body. Just the right amount of muscle, and he moves well.”

Kate shakes her head in disgust.

“Don’t even!” I tell her. “He’s not that different than Steve.”

“Yes, but inside Steve’s hot body is a great guy. Not some dude like Ben.”

“He’s not a good guy, Ivy,” Nathan says.

“How do you know?” I ask. “Nobody here has given him any sort of chance or ever tried to know him. Have either of you actually tried to talk to him?”

“Yes,” they both say.

“When he first showed up,” Kate says. “I thought he might be interesting, but talking to him, it’s not easy. His head is always off somewhere, and he just thinks about things in weird ways.”

“He was really curious about me, but never opened up about himself. Whenever I asked about him, it was weird, like five minutes later, we’re on a completely different subject, and I realize he never actually answered me. I know his name and that’s the only thing he’s told me about himself in three months,” Nathan adds.

“But now we know he’s a maniac driver, complete loner, he has no idea about any modern culture. I don’t think he listens to any music or reads any books that are less than a hundred years old. He’s so separated from everything.”

“So, he’s interested in different things than you are?” I ask them. “That isn’t a crime.”

“I don’t want him arrested,” Kate says. “I just don’t want him around me.”

“Or you, for that matter,” Nathan says. “He’s got eyes for you, too, and I don’t trust him.”

“Maybe give him another chance,” I say.

“Maybe find a boyfriend that’s human,” Kate says.

“That’s completely not fair!” I say. I’ve had enough, and I walk away from the two of them and my lunch.

Unfortunately, things are no better at home. The entire time during dinner, I know Grandma's got something on her mind. Just before we finish up, she finally spits it out.

"I've done a little checking up on that Ben guy."

I put my fork down and frown at Grandma.

"Did Carl put you up to this?"

"Ben's parents seem to own their house fair and square, and their last address checks out, and the one before that. But they don't seem to work, and they don't seem to come from money, so I'm wondering how they bought it."

"You did your own little background check on his family?" For the second time today, I get up to walk away from a good meal ruined by a bad conversation.

"Sit!" Grandma says.

I do. I don't want to, but I do. Grandma's got that kind of command to her. Doesn't even need magic to do it.

"Carl's got good judgement, he's a good measure of character. He may be rash and impatient and sometimes too much of a dumb boy, but he can sniff out a bad person pretty well, and he says this Ben stinks."

I almost blurt out that Carl just smells somebody that's got an actual chance of getting in my pants, but I manage to bite my tongue. Instead, I say, "Carl's just jealous."

"Carl's a good man," Grandma says.

"You just told me he's a dumb boy."

"Sometimes. Most of the time, he's one of the most solid and dependable people I know. And you know it, too, Ivy."

I sigh hard. The unfortunate part of all of this is that Grandma's right on that count. Carl has never failed me when I've needed him. There have

been times when Carl's gotten me out of trouble I didn't even know I was in yet.

The truth is, I have always loved Carl deeply. But not in any romantic way. We're so close, we could be blood, and I've never seen him as anything else.

"That's fine, Grandma. But that doesn't mean I have to be his girlfriend. He will always be my best friend, but never my boyfriend."

Grandma shrugs her shoulders. "He still cares a lot about you, Ivy. And when he says somebody is not right for you, you should trust him. He's probably right."

I stand up again. "I'm sorry, Grandma. I'm willing to trust Carl on a lot of things. But not this. Because if he keeps me away from Ben, he's going to try to keep me away from the next guy, and the next guy after that. He'll just keep going until he's the only guy left in the world, and you're going to help him."

"That's not what this is about. It's not just Ben's family I've checked up on—"

"Check up on this," I yell. "I'm eighteen, I'm my own woman now, I've lived my entire life to your satisfaction right up until now. Straight As in school, all the right extracurriculars to get scholarships to the right college, a good job, never had any trouble with anybody, and I've been studying under you so diligently even you tell me you've never had a student work so hard. So you and Carl both need to trust me to live my own life for myself from here on out, and stop interfering in it." I push my chair up to the table with a bang and stomp up the stairs to my room.

I unlock my phone and open my email.

I type bwake@students.smshs.edu into the address line.

I read over the email I wrote him yesterday, telling him how much I wanted to know more about him, how I knew there was more to him than anybody else was willing to give him credit for. That same email that I kept failing to send last night while Kate and Nathan were over. At the end, I add, “I want to see you tonight. Call me.”

Not five minutes pass when my phone rings. I don’t recognize the number, but I answer it right away.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Ivy?”

“Ben!” I say, suddenly happy and now ten times more nervous than I was when I had hit the Send button.

“It turns out I am free tonight. What would you like to do?”

“Anything that gets me out of this house,” I say.

There’s a little pause from the other end. “Do you trust me and my cycle enough yet to go for a ride together?”

Now it’s my turn to hesitate and think. Most of me wants absolutely nothing to do with that thing yet, remembering how he’d ridden my tail before swerving around me and forcing me to get out of his way to protect him from his own stupidity. A part of me, though, remembers the times I’ve seen him riding since, much more responsible, putting what looks like a good degree of skill to proper use.

That second part wins out, and I finally say, “I do.”

“Good.” I can hear his smile over the line.

I tell him my address, and warn him about how one of his turns is on a blind corner and really easy to miss.

“Got it,” he says. “Shall I drive right up to the house, or will you meet me a little ways away?”

I immediately say, “At the house,” then find myself impressed that he’d picked up on my frustration right now, and correctly guessed that I might prefer to keep our meeting under wraps. But I’m an adult now, eighteen. Grandma can be mad at me all she wants for going out with Ben, but there’s nothing she can do to stop me.

“It’s still cool out. I’ve got some spare gear that will fit you, but if you’ve got some long underwear and a tight fleece jacket or pullover, that will help,” Ben says. “My app here tells me I can be to your place in about a half hour.”

I bundle up with a couple extra, close-fitting layers and then fret until I hear a motorcycle come up the driveway. I walk down to the foot of the stairs, and wait for him to ring the bell.

“That’s Ben,” I call out to living room.

Grandma and I meet in the hallway. I shoot her a look to let her know I need her to be civil, and open the door. Ben is standing there in the dim light of late evening, a respectful step back from the threshold.

“Good evening, ma’am. I am Ben Wake. Is it Miss Sparks, or are you from Ivy’s mother’s family?”

“Mrs. Sparks will suffice for now,” Grandma says, offering her hand, but not approaching the doorway.

Ben makes just the smallest hesitation before he looks at me and asks, “Would you like me to come in for a minute, or shall we head out?”

I scowl at Grandma. Just standing there three steps inside the house instead of coming up to greet Ben properly. “Let’s go,” I say.

“Have a good evening, ma’am,” Ben says to Grandma, offering me his arm.

I take it and turn away from Grandma. I see there is a helmet on the motorcycle, sitting on the side mirror, and roll of leather attached to the

saddle by an elastic net.

My heart leaps inside my chest, but I’m not sure whether it’s more anxious about getting on a motorcycle for the first time in my life, or excited that I’m about to put my arms around Ben.

Chapter Six

Ben Wake

Ivy's grandmother's behavior puzzles me. Why did she stand well out of my reach inside the house, offering her hand, but not inviting me in? There's no way she could know I'm a vampire. One thing all of the clans have always agreed on is that we keep our existence secret to only the most select few. Even many of the claimed never know that their lover is immortal. My clan, the Negre, keep very meticulous records on which of the warm know about us, whether they learned from us or from another clan. I checked the records in the clan archives before moving to Stokers Mill, and saw that there were no known warm in the area aware of us. Once my eyes settled on Ivy, and I learned her surname was Sparks, I certainly would have recalled anybody else with that name I had come across in the archives.

The fact that a thrope is practically part of the family is even more disconcerting. Have they abandoned their own ancient tradition of secrecy as well? Has Carl told Ivy's grandmother not only about the thropes but about the vampires as well? How else would the old woman know about my inability to enter a dwelling unless invited?

Of course, I could just be paranoid, and it could have just been her way trying to intimidate me in front of Ivy – put me in a place where I could either brush past her, uninvited to shake her hand, or just walk away in

defeat. In my time, I've met no shortage of overprotective women who've made any number of silly attempts to scare me off.

All of that is distraction, though. Whatever she knows, if she knows it today, she'll still know it tomorrow. Tonight, though, right now, Ivy's hand is in the crook of my arm, and she's looking at me, expectantly. We're at the motorcycle, and I'm just standing there.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" I ask her, smiling.

"Yes," she says.

I unclip the bungee net holding my spare gear to the saddle and offer it to her. "I'm sorry that I don't have an extra pair of leather pants in your size." I unroll the gear and offering her the overpants. "The textile is much more adjustable for different sizes. Just unzip those two long zippers along either leg, and step in."

I can't help but watch as Ivy dons the pants, wiggling and bouncing a bit this way and that to get them on and close the long zippers up either outseam. In a way, it's like a strip tease in reverse, where putting clothes on is where the thrill is at. Next comes the leather jacket, which requires no explanation, and also a lot less movement of her body. Once she's got it zipped up, though, I must admit that she wears it well. Even with the extra layers for warmth, underneath a man's heavy jacket, she still manages to look deliciously feminine.

"Ok. Helmet next." I show her how to get it on and fasten the chin strap properly. "Now, lean your head back," I say, both so I can make sure she's got it on and adjusted correctly, but also because it gives me one more look at her lovely, pale neck. I see just the slightest hint of her pulse running through the vein beneath the skin.

It reminds me that I took a couple rabbits over the past few days, but it's been a long time since I've fed to the point I was truly satisfied. I need

that distraction now even less than I needed my pondering of her grandmother's actions, and turn away from her delicately exposed throat to grab a pair of gloves for her.

Once she's got them on, I show her how to lift and close the visor on the helmet.

"You'll want it down as soon as we start moving. Keep the bugs out of your face and eyes, and cut the wind noise. That noise can actually fatigue you surprisingly fast," I tell her while I zip my jacket back up and put on my own helmet and gloves.

"I'm surprised that you even own one of those," Ivy tells me, tapping the top of the helmet.

"The last place I lived had a helmet law."

"You should wear it anyways. I never like seeing people ride without one," she tells me.

"Maybe someday, you'll be privileged to talk me into it," I say.

Through her visor, I see her smile shyly at that remark.

"Ok. I'm going to get on the bike, start it, and then raise the kickstand. Wait until I tell you, then climb on behind me. The easiest way will be for you to put your hands on my shoulders, plant your foot on the left peg there, and throw your right over the saddle. Got it?"

"Got it," she says.

"And the most important thing to remember is to never fight me and the bike in curves or turns. We need to all lean together. The easiest way to keep you in sync with me is for you to just look over my inside shoulder. Meaning as soon as you feel me start leaning right, I want you to look over my right shoulder. Same when you feel me start to lean left. You do that one thing for me, and we'll have a safe ride."

She hesitates for a second, then nods. I ask if she's sure she's ready for this, and she nods again, a little more confidently this time. I'm glad to see that little bit of uncertainty in her, but not any overt fear. The first time somebody rides the back of a bike, it's good for them to have that little twinge to make sure they respect the machine and the road.

I settle onto the bike and get her started and then steady and balanced for Ivy. "Ready to feel more alive than you have all week?" I ask.

"I already do," she says.

"Get on."

Instead of taking her up the sharp switchbacks that lead up out of the valley, I drive along the river road. It's a nice, clean highway, good shoulders and a lot of long, sweeping curves where I can lean the bike over just a little bit, but for a few long seconds. It's a beginner's road, just wiggly enough that you that you feel a proper ride in your core, but not so challenging as to leave a new rider or passenger constantly anxious from one technically challenging stretch to the next.

Ivy does great behind me, always looking over the correct shoulder and leaning in and out of the curves with me. We're both wearing way too many layers, two of them leather, for me to really feel the contours of her torso pressed tight against my back, but I am constantly aware of her thighs straddling my hips. A couple of times, I drop a gear and rev the engine, setting a wave of vibrations coursing from the engine, up through the frame, where they're barely dampened by the padded saddle before tingling into flesh. Every time I do so, I feel her squeeze me tighter.

Ten miles up the road, she is mostly relaxed against me, and takes the curves even easier. We are in a near-perfect moment, her holding onto me, her body following mine so closely it's almost as if she's anticipating my every move. We're in nearly perfect synchronicity. If there were not so

much warm and protective clothing between us, I'm sure our hearts would start to beat together.

But as glorious as this moment is, I also picked this particular road for its potential for something even closer to a moment of perfection. Just around the next curve there's pull off that overlooks a particularly picturesque stretch of the river. I slow the bike way down to make sure I don't skid out as I turn onto the gravel pad, and roll up to a parking spot. Once I get the bike braced and shut off, I tap Ivy's thigh to signal her to dismount.

I watch her as she takes off her helmet and slowly shakes her head side to side to try loosen up her cascade of long, dark hair from the grip of helmet head. I realize this is the first time I'm seeing her face in darkness, instead of under the painful glare of sunlight, or the much more tolerable but still sterile artificial light. I'm seeing her, finally, in my most natural conditions, and I find myself briefly transfixed. This is a woman who was designed from the soul outwards to be seen under the pale and soft light crescent moon and a million stars.

Just before she notices me staring at her, I snap out of it and ask, "How was it?"

"Once I relaxed, a lot of fun. Thank you."

"Good," I say. "So we don't need to call somebody to drive you home from here in a car?"

Ivy laughs. "Not unless you're planning on going back into idiot mode for the trip back."

"No," I tell her. "Never again, whether you're there to see me or not."

The evening is mild enough that we're comfortable enough after we take off our riding gear. I walk over to a bench overlooking the river and sit down. Ivy sits down close to me. That distance where we're clearly

separated, but all it will take is just a little lean for us to touch. I wouldn't measure it in inches, but in potential. It is her telling me that the night is mine to lose.

"Have people been giving you a hard time about me?" I ask her.

"I don't want to talk about other people right now," she says. "I want to know what brings you to Nowhere, Colorado. Population: Too few to be interesting."

I hate to lie to her, but, 'I'm a vampire on the run from my clan because I've crossed them too many times and now they want to kill me,' would not win the night for me. I had prepared a few stories in advance, just for this moment. I opt for the one that is least far from the truth.

"Hiding," I say. "My parents and I, we're hiding from the rest of our family."

Ivy looks at me, searching my face in the dark. I feel a little bit guilty that I have such the advantage over her right now. I know that my face is nearly featureless to her now, while I've never before seen her so clearly, more clearly than she sees me even under the bright and burning sun.

"Like, mafia or something?" she asks. I can hear the skepticism in her voice.

"No," I say. "Nothing like that. We're not criminals, just wealthy, powerful, and terribly dishonest. We're not hiding from them because we're afraid of harm. We just don't want anything to do with them, and we don't want anybody to know that we're related to them. People would try to use us as leverage if they found out. So mom asked for just enough money, an early inheritance basically, to keep us comfortable. In exchange, we agreed to change our names and hide all ties we have with them."

I can see several competing expressions cross Ivy's face as she decides whether to believe me or not. The quality of my riding gear (and me having

two sets of it), the well-tended vintage bike and the car I drive, my clothes. Once I embraced my immortality and the boundless wealth I had enjoyed when I was in favor with the Negre clan, I had developed a style that whispered ‘money’ instead of shouting it.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me who your family is, can you?”

“Someday. Not today, though. Much like you, I don’t feel much like talking about other people right now.”

Ivy laughs. “Fair enough. Tell me how you found this place, then.” She waves her arm to take in the overlook.

“I’ve always been fascinated by rivers. All this water that comes from somewhere and it flows on and on, never stopping. Sometimes in flood, sometimes low, but always flowing on toward somewhere else.” I gesture at the canyon the river has carved in the valley floor. “Given enough time, that constant flow of soft water defeats even hard, ancient rock. I take this road a lot, because I love to just follow the river through the valley. I think it only took me two or three times passing by here to just know I needed to stop and savor the view.”

“I’ve lived in Stokers Mill all my life. I’m on this road at least a couple times a month, and it never once occurred to me to pull over here.”

“They say that’s the problem with living somewhere all your life. You grow up and everything is so familiar by the time you learn to be curious that you miss so much beauty around you.”

“You’ve lived many places?” Ivy asks.

“It was my birth that really drove my parents to break ties with the family. They didn’t want to raise a child in that place. My whole life, we’ve moved every two or three years.”

“So you get a lot of chances to see the hidden beauty in new places?”

“I do,” I tell her. Then a truth I wasn’t ready to reveal slips out. “But it’s so lonely. You just start to know some place or somebody, like truly and deeply know them, and then you leave. The places, you say goodbye to them forever. The people, you try to keep in touch, but it rarely works for very long. Relationships are built on shared experience, and once you stop sharing experiences with someone, their shared experiences with other people turn into other important relationships to them, and you drift apart.”

Ivy turns to face me. In the process, her leg brushes against mine. Neither of us breaks the contact. “Is that why you’re so unreachable now?”

I sigh. “I won’t say that I’ve given up trying, but with every move, I find it harder to start again. The same introduction over and over again, the same process of finding the people you are drawn toward, of opening up parts of yourself to let them in. And all so you can lose everything again the next time the seasons change. So I find myself spending more time with places than with people with every move. Places are easy to fall in love with, and you don’t fool yourself into thinking you’ll always love them no matter how far apart fate takes you. People are harder to fall in love with, infinitely harder to leave.”

Ivy turns a little more, so she’s sitting sideways on the bench, facing me. “That poem you left me,” she says. “That tells me you still have some fight in you.”

“I didn’t even try, the last place I was at,” I say. “Here is different. I’ve just turned eighteen, you know. I don’t have to follow my parents anymore. If they want to move again, I can stay if I want to, or I can move to someplace else without them.”

Ivy locks eyes with me for a couple of seconds, then, looks down. I’m doing everything I can to not let her know how hard my heart is pounding in my chest, how my breath keeps catching in my throat. I glance at her

neck, looking to see if her blood is also flowing faster and stronger, then look away from her as well when I realize that my fangs are aching.

“I have been working on another one,” I say.

“What?” Ivy asks, looking back up at me, a little puzzled. But I’m glad of the distraction of her eyes to take my attention from her neck.

“Another poem,” I say. “It’s a triolet, a French style, very short. At some point in my life I realized that no matter where I go, how many places and people I leave behind, the sky is always the same.”

“Can I hear it,” Ivy asks.

I have a copy of it in my pocket, but I choose to bring it up from memory.

“Under the moon’s most gentle light
Could anything else be more true?
We need not see, just touch at night.
Under the moon’s most gentle light
Well hidden from mere mortal sight.
A moment freed for me with you
Under the moon’s most gentle light
Could anything else be more true?”

Ivy sits there in silence, but the look on her face speaks with great eloquence.

Our legs are still touching.

I reach a hand out and touch her cheek. It’s warm, and trembles slightly. I wait until she lifts her eyes to mine, she swallows and smiles.

I part my lips slightly and lean forward. She closes her eyes and tilts her head a little bit to the side. I close my eyes as well, using the sound of her breath to guide me the rest of the way to her. The first brush of our lips is tentative, cautious, light as a lock of hair brushed across your face by a

gentle breeze. She takes a deep breath in as I break the kiss and back off just a touch. Ivy cranes her neck toward me and I back away again, keeping just close enough that we can feel each other's breath on our lips.

"Don't tease," Ivy says.

I move my hand to the back of her head and gently pull us together. The second kiss is still light, careful, but it lingers for a long while until we pull away and open our eyes to look at each other.

They say the third time is a charm. Our third kiss works an undeniable magic upon me. We kiss deeper this time, her lips part as well as mine, and shyly, the tips of our tongues touch, fleeting little passes. I put my other hand on her shoulder. She puts an arm around me, exploring my back, while she lets the other rest on my chest. Pretty soon, we fall into a rhythm, kissing deeper and lighter in time with her breathing in and out.

We reach a moment when I find my hand wandering from her shoulder down the front of her chest, but I stop myself before I reach her breast. It's not yet time for that.

"I hate to say this, Ivy, but I should really take you home now."

Her breath is ragged, her cheeks flushed, her mouth still slightly open, hungry. "I hate to agree with you, but yes," she says. She rolls her head back a little bit and closes her eyes.

I will not lie. I took the ride home as slow as I could without making it obvious that I was making it last as long as I possibly could. Feeling her body up against my back again, arms wrapped around me, legs holding me a little closer than they did on the ride out. That near-perfect feeling on the way to the river was replaced by a sense of utter perfection as we left it behind us. There was nothing in the world I would have changed in that moment.

Chapter Seven

Carl Wilson

While I was hunting last night, I picked up the scent of a fairly fresh deer kill. There was no smell of spilt blood, no stink of illness, just a kind of staleness that animals often have about them before decomposition sets in, with its characteristic sickly-sweet reek. I don't scavenge except under the most desperate of circumstances, but curiosity drove me to delay my hunt for fresh meat to check it out.

I found the kill site, saw that the deer had been dragged a short distance away to a clump of bushes and hastily covered up. I don't think very well in wolf form, so I did my best to memorize the location and marked it before moving on in search of livelier quarry.

This morning, there's a small window of time before school starts where I’ve got enough daylight to go to the site and check it out.

My memories of the night before get me close to the dead deer, and then I use the claw marks I'd made on several trees to bring me to the precise spot. Judging by the way the leaves are kicked up, something must have tackled the deer, but there wasn't much struggle after that. The motionless animal was then dragged into a heavier clump of bushes and hastily covered up with leaves and other detritus. I clear it off and examine it. It was a young buck, maybe a year old, so not very big yet.

It looks like it's been here for about a day. I can tell immediately that its neck was broken. Deer, even one as young as this, are strong animals. It would take considerable strength to kill it that way. Anywhere that I can see its skin, it is very pale. That and a few other signs tell me it had been drained almost completely of blood. I immediately look closely at the neck, and find two fang marks.

Looks like zombie Ben is supplementing his human diet with wild game. Still, one drop of blood from one of the local people is one too many. He needs to move on. Unfortunately, it's now clear that he has eyes on Ivy, and nothing makes a male – man or zombie boy – linger in a place like a pretty girl.

The one credit I must grudgingly give to Ben is that it looks like he took the deer down gently, and gave it a quick end instead of leaving it weak and vulnerable from blood loss. When I hunt, my strength and power usually kill my prey suddenly, but it's also very bloody and gruesome.

I leave the deer where I found it and continue to examine the area. It was dry and calm last night, so I'm still able to make out the track the deer took, but it takes me a long time to find the place where Ben had waited to ambush it. He was careful, and tread very lightly. I mentally note this, and wonder at his background that he can leave almost no trace under these conditions, stalk a wild animal, and take it down by hand. Once I realized Ben was a zombie, I felt he must be one of the older ones. Easily old enough to have fought in the Great War between my kind and his. So how old is he, really.

I had to learn a lot about vampires during the Great War, their habits and psychology, their physiology. Judging by the size of the deer, I figure Ben can go at least a week now before he he'll need to feed again. I don't want him near Ivy when the compulsion starts to get strong.

It's time for me to head in to school. As I walk back to my car, I curse Ben for taking up so much of my morning. I'd spent most of the night out on the prowl, and would have really liked to have slept in. One more reason for me to not like him.

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"You're looking a little rough this morning, Graylock," Kate says to me. "And Ivy isn't here yet, either..."

"Don't even with that," I tell her. "You know it's not like that with us." This is a very tiresome joke of Kate's. Sometimes I think she borders on mean-spiritedness with that. She's generally a decent person, but seems to take a perverse thrill in taunting me this way.

"I'm just saying that you two are often running late on the same mornings."

"I have no idea what Ivy was doing last night," I say. "I was out enjoying the woods under the full moon. Alone."

"Were you out until dawn?" Kate asks. I notice she's looking at my pant leg. I must have brushed against a pricker bush while I was checking up on Ben's kill this morning.

I have to think of something quick. "I think a coyote took out a raccoon last night, left it half-eaten in my yard. I took the remains out to the woods so they don't stink my place up." Inside, I want to slap myself for pinning my morning on a coyote. Ben doesn't deserve to be compared to any canine, not even a lowly coyote.

"You can stand doing that?" Kate asks.

"If it has to be done, it has to be done," I say.

"Well, I'm calling you next time we get something like that in our yard. I don't like having to deal with those messes, and my dad's even a bigger

priss than Mom and me, and I don’t like to ask Nathan to handle dead animals."

“Unless I’m cooking one for you,” Nathan says, swatting at Kate with his fingertips.

"Graylock Carcass Cleanup is always available," I say.

"What would Ivy think if she saw you flirting with Kate like that, especially after the night you two had together?" Nathan asks.

I am just about to tell Nathan to lay off when we see Ivy pull her car into the lot, right as the first bell rings.

"Ivy IQ is never this late," Nathan says. He's got a genuine look of concern on her face, and I know that all joking about last night is at an end. He's right, though. Ivy is never tardy for school unless something is terribly wrong.

I look back toward Ivy and notice Ben's motorcycle right behind her. Ivy finds two empty spaces side by side, and they pull in next to each other.

"Oh..." Kate says, as we watch Ivy get out of her car while Ben parks his bike. There is very definitely something different about the way they are interacting this morning. "Come on, Carl," Kate says. "We'll be late for class."

I can't take my eyes off of Ben and Ivy. They both keep looking our way as they talk.

"Carl!" Kate says. "Let's go."

"It's Ok," I tell her. "I can tell what's going on, too."

"Then go to class," Nathan says.

I don't move.

"We're mad, too, Carl. We don't want her with that freak any more than you do, but getting into it here and now isn't going to help."

"Let us talk to her. It won't do anybody any good for you to lose your temper at her," Kate says.

"Or at him," Nathan adds.

I stand up and walk toward the front door. I risk a quick look back just as I'm inside the building, and they're holding hands as they walk.

It takes everything I've got to keep walking to class. In the end, it's remembering what Grandma told me the other night that gets me to walk away. If I harm Ben, they'll take it out on Ivy. As mad as I am at her as well, it would kill me if anything ever happened to her.

I let my morning classes distract me from my mood. Ironically it is because of Ivy that I find those classes so calming. My morning is Music, Shop, English Lit, and Graphic Design. Ivy is the one that first showed me that the arts could be something much more than mandatory classes that weren't going to get me anywhere in life. When she told me some of the stories behind her favorite piano songs, and played certain passages over and over again, telling me how the composer used different sounds and patterns to create emotion, I finally understood why it was important.

From there I figured out that it's not just sound that can affect people that way. Words can do it, images. The way Ivy could explain these things to me in ways no teacher ever could was part of why I so admire, and honestly, love her.

I get to the lunch table that Ivy typically shares with Kate, Nathan, and me, and pretty soon my mood sours again. She never shows. I'm so worried about her being with that zombie that I barely touch my lunch – something very unusual, since my wolf blood gives me a pretty indestructible stomach. Even Nathan notices it, and seems to back even farther off from his teasing.

"Carl, I know you don't want to hear this, but let us talk to Ivy about Ben," Kate says. "I know you very legitimately care for her, but anything

you say about Ben is going to sound like you're just jealous that he gets her and you don't." I know she wants to add more, about my tendency to get pretty hot headed, but she bites it off.

I know they're right. Kate and Nathan are right, Grandma is right, everybody is right. If I try to come between Ben and Ivy, I'm going to just push her farther away from me and ever closer to him. I still chafe at being told to do nothing about a problem. Problems are meant to be solved, not watched.

Of my afternoon classes, only the hour of Gym set between Algebra 2 and Physics offers me any distraction from my feelings. Even Gym is tough, though. We're in the middle of a month of wrestling lessons, and while it's good to get to tangle physically with someone, I have to keep reminding myself to play nice, to hide my actual strength, to not just let myself go on some poor kid who doesn't deserve it.

By the time the day ends, I've gotten myself completely worked up. I walk out the door, and there I see Ben and Ivy, walking hand in hand again. The zombie isn't wearing his absurd glasses and is bare headed. I look out into the parking lot and see a helmet sitting on one of his motorcycle's mirrors. The zombie is obviously trying to play like he's a nice, respectable boy, riding his bike like an old man now, and wearing a lid. He's also outside in full sunlight now, which vampires simply cannot stand. A tiny voice inside of me briefly says, ‘No,’ but I ignore it, and catch up with them.

"Ivy, Ben," I say. It's taking everything I've got to stay calm and cool when I approach. They turn to look at me, still holding hands. "Mind if I take a minute," I ask Ben, keeping it civil, trying to sound as natural as I can.

"Sure," he says, squinting into the sun, trying not to wince in pain. I'd intentionally approached with the sun directly behind me, so it would be in his eyes whenever he tried to talk to me. "I'll call you later tonight," he says.

Both of them are polite enough, or maybe just scared enough of me going off, that they don't kiss goodbye right in front of me. Ivy just says, "Yes. I'll look forward to it." Her eyes follow him as he scurries off to his bike to cover up from the mean old sun and go back to his little crypt.

"Since Grandma's gone, want me to come over and keep you company for dinner?"

She turns her eyes from Ben to me. "Thanks, but I'll be fine tonight." She gives me a really awkward smile. The kind that always says, ‘I want to let you down easy.’

"He's not coming over, is he?" I ask.

"Not like it's any of your business, but no. Grandma's rules, no boys over to the house when she's on the road."

"Well, no boys you have any chance of doing anything with," I say. It sounds way more petulant and whiny than I'd intended. I sound weak.

"You're family, Carl. And she likes you coming by when she's gone, because she trusts that nothing could ever hurt me while you're there."

How can one word be simultaneously the best and worst thing anybody could call you? I lost my family when I was five. Murdered by vampires in the great war. A couple other werewolves took me in to foster, but they weren't family, and they never let me be a child. From the moment my parents died, I went into training to be a soldier, a vampire killer. They didn't love me, they didn't care for me, they just molded me.

When Grandma calls me ‘Family,’ nothing in all of the world makes me happier. To have a woman I look up to consider me as close as her own blood fills me with such pride. But when Ivy uses that word with me, it's

something else. It's a limitation, a cage. Sisters don't love brothers the way I wish Ivy could love me.

That one word, ‘Family,’ out of her mouth is a future I long for rendered impossible.

"I should come by, then, so Grandma can relax knowing I'm there."

"No," Ivy says, sharply. "We both know what's going to happen. You're going to just bad mouth Ben all night long. Maybe you'll start politely, but you're not going to stop, and I am sick and tired of everybody constantly pushing me about this."

I open my mouth to say something.

"Shut it," she says. "I can take care of myself. I can date who I want to date, whether you or Grandma or anybody else likes him or not. I see something in him that I really like and that I don't see in anybody else." Ivy looks down at her shoes and bites her lip.

I know what she's about to say next, and I don't want to hear it out loud, but I also respect her enough to not walk away from her right now.

"Not even you, Carl."

Behind me, I hear Ben's little toy drive off. She finally looks up, not at me, but to watch him go. I'm furious at him for using all the skill at charming women he's certainly picked up over his many years to turn my sensible Ivy into a love-struck fool.

"There's a lot about Ben you don't know," I say.

"I know enough. He told me about his family last night, about how they have to live. He's just been needing somebody to reach out to him and open up a bit."

"Oh, he told you, did he? What did he say?"

"He said you need to earn his trust enough for him to tell you the story is what he said, Carl."

I shake my head at her. "Whatever he told you is a lie. There is no Ben Wake, it's just a name he's using for now, and that he'll discard, along with you, as soon as he gets what he wants."

"See, Carl? This is why I don't want you to come over tonight."

"This is why you need me to come over, Ivy." I'm trying so hard to not break the secrecy of the vampires, because there's no way I could do that and not break the secrecy about my people as well. It would also break the Truce for any one of us, zombie or blood, to out one of the others. I don't care about the truce, though. I care about protecting my own. And when I say ‘my own’, I mean my blood and I mean Ivy.

"I can't deal with this anymore. I can't deal with you anymore, Carl."

"And I can't stand by and see someone I love be taken and used by something like Ben."

Ivy stares at me. I realize both of the mistakes I just made, dropping the l-word with her, and referring to Ben as a thing. I can't stop myself, though. The wolf has got a hold of my tongue.

"You want Ben, take him, but if you do, I walk away. Which is it? All the good years we've had as best of friends, or some gloomy fop that just sauntered into town."

"Well thank you for giving me a simple choice," Ivy says. "You can turn around and walk away. Right now."

I open my mouth to speak, and she cuts me off again.

"Shut it, Carl. Shut it and keep it shut."

Now I'm angry, and that always gives the wolf more control. If I open my mouth, I will regret to my dying day what comes out of it. I clamp my teeth together and turn away. Keeping quiet now is my only chance of salvaging anything that we once had, if there's anything left of her after Ben throws her away.

Ivy doesn't know that even in human form, I still have unusually acute hearing. Nowhere near as sharp as when I'm in wolf form, but enough that I barely hear her whisper, "Carl," and "Please?" as I walk away.

I have never in my life had as much trouble putting one foot in front of the other as I am now. The wolf is whispering in my ear to go out and hunt, rend, tear, kill. It reminds me of the feel of hot blood spraying all over my face, of the metallic taste of raw flesh in my mouth. The wolf reminds me that for all the years of childhood I lost learning to stalk and destroy vampires, the Truce happened before I ever got to use any of it. “Just once,” the wolf whispers. “Just once. Use it...”

I need to silence the wolf right now. I start humming some of Ivy's favorite piano music. It doesn't completely silence the wolf, but I at least remind it that any harm we bring to Ben will be paid for in Ivy's blood. They will send more zombies than I could ever dream of fending off to destroy her.

Chapter Eight

Nathan Marsh

It’s time for a little bit of good, old-fashioned misbehavior. Not too much anymore, really, since the family I live with considers me to be over eighteen now. There’s an agreement with my ‘parents’ that I may stay at the house without rent as long as I remain in good standing for my last year of school. There’s really no reason for them to forbid me from leaving the house at nine in the evening to drive to Wyoming, but at the same time, it would in theory be hard for me to pay attention at school tomorrow.

The weekend would be a much better time for me to take an overnight and not cause any trouble with my cover family, but Emily will be gone in the morning for several days, and I’m certain that things with Carl and Ivy are about to sour quite severely, since she is at this very moment out with Ben.

Being able to drive very fast and without headlights, I cover the miles to the state line in just a couple or hours, and then find myself in Pangbourne a couple of hours later. The little town of barely ninety people is dead quiet at nearly two in the morning. All of the houses are dark, and there’s a light smell of wood smoke in the air from a few homes that have a stove burning to fend off the chill in the air.

One of the houses has neither wood nor propane burning to keep it warm. I can barely detect its occupant, whose body is barely above the temperature of the air around it, but the computer it is sitting at shines clearly in my sight. This is the one I want to know about.

She has game cameras around the home, and I can detect the wires of burglar alarms around the doors and windows. Her attempts at warding against my kind are unskilled, though, amateurish and rushed. I must have scared her when I removed the other hunter from consideration back in January, but she has not maintained her wards around the property. The outer circle around her yard is so insignificant that I can pass the boundary freely without hesitation or alerting her at all, especially since I am keeping my mortal form mostly intact and my true nature mostly suppressed.

I creep up to one of the windows and find that even in the dark of night, the blackout curtains are drawn. The thick fabric hides even the sound of the keyboard from my sensitive ears. Since the vampire inside seems quite intent on whatever is on its screen, I come around to the detached garage. The physical burglar alarm is easy to spot. The more subtle protections take some more examination to locate and care to circumvent. There is a ward on every door, but like the outer circle, she does not have the skill to set one properly against one as strong as I am. I look behind me, and can detect a more serious protection for the house itself, possibly set by someone stronger and more experienced, but it has not been properly maintained. Still, it would take me a lot more time than I have available if I wished to go through it without alerting her.

Once I get past the door and into the garage, I take a quick inventory. On the surface, it looks like the garage of somebody who loves to work their machines hard, and takes fastidious care of them. The truck is a big dual-wheeled pickup. The motorcycle is a KTM Duke 690 adventure bike,

and there are two ATVs. Red tool chests and a workbench line one wall. A mountain bike hangs from the rafters. The concrete floor is sealed and swept, not a thing is out of place. The pickup and one of the ATVs have hefty, rugged tool boxes mounted on them. I pick the lock on the one on the ATV, and find that underneath a tray for smaller tools, there's a hidden compartment. Inside, I find a pistol loaded with silver bullets, silvered blades, and other implements for hunting other vampires. They all have the signature drop of blood in a drop of blood sigil of the Negre vampire clan.

There's a part of me that wants to finally end this hunt I've been on for the past four years, looking for this particular hunter. But for one thing. Ivy's recent divination had inspired me, and I did some work of my own, using my sight to look around the corners and into the shadows of the future. The only ones where Ivy lives beyond the next month have this hunter in them. So I need to find out what she's up to.

Unfortunately, I have no means of intercepting whatever she's looking for online. I am good, but nowhere near good enough to get into the house and just look over her shoulder undetected. Another look at her weapons shows me she's only concerned with a vampire, not with a werewolf or a mortal. Sure, she's got the standard protections up against lycanthropes, but the kit she has is very specialized for hunting her own kind.

Interestingly, there's nothing set up for my kind, even though I had taken great care with the other hunter I dispatched a few months back to make it clear exactly what sort of creature was responsible. Perhaps they consider the encounter between myself and the other vampire to have been a truly random occurrence. It is no secret that my kind have no love for their kind.

In that case, the nearly single-minded focus on hunting another vampire tells me this one might be aware of Ben's presence in the area.

That she is not preparing for werewolves tells me she hasn't gotten close enough to Ben to know that that Carl is in the equation. Which means that Ivy hopefully has not come to her attention yet, either.

But my peek into the future tells me Ivy's survival beyond the next few weeks is tied into this particular hunter. So I do not think it will be long before she narrows in on Ben. And as much as I dislike Ben, he is tied into Ivy's fate as well. I still do not know what that fate is, though. Just that she has drawn Ben, Carl, and myself to her. Unfortunately, all three of us have histories as well. I just hope that Ivy does not get caught up in them.

But I have lingered longer than is safe. If the hunter catches me in her garage, things will not go well for her in the ensuing fight. I carefully let myself out of the garage and undo whatever disruption I've done to her alarms and tells. I wait a few blocks down, watching her house for an hour, but she doesn't leave. I would like to stay longer, but I need to get on the road back to Stokers Mill for school, and the hunter is unlikely to come out to start something closer to dawn than midnight.

I make it back home barely in time to sneak back into my room before somebody comes to wake me up. Kate cocks an eyebrow at me while she sits at the table eating a bowl of cereal. Since I don't sleep, I am usually out of my room before Kate, and ever since my body has been big enough to reach the stove, I have made her breakfast when I've heard her start waking up. Even though I keep to what mortals would consider a vegan diet, I have no qualms against cook her eggs and sausage, buttered toast, or hash. Over time, it has become a ritual between us, the way we start the day. I think having that daily touchpoint with somebody as good-hearted as Kate has gone a long way towards tempering my occasional tendency to let my blood run hot. It has become especially important to both of us this spring, as Kate will be moving to Boston at the end of August to start college.

Our parents may not have noticed anything – they can be rather dense that way. But Kate most definitely knows the only reason I would not have been in the kitchen before she was out of bed is if I were out of the house. Her look is a silent way of asking me if I were up to trouble she might need to cover me for.

"Do I even want to know?" she asks, after our parents head out for work.

"I was up in Wyoming," I tell her, fishing around in the fridge for some berries and an orange. I rather enjoy being able to tell a positively ridiculous truth to her.

"Well, I hope you gassed up the car. It's your turn to drive today."

It isn't until mid-morning that I get a chance to talk to Ivy alone. Our second period classes are next to each other, and we have AP Chem together for third. Teachers long ago figured out that I was a bad influence on Ivy's lab work, so I know that I've got just a few minutes before we get to class and end up at lab benches on the opposite sides of the room.

"Good evening last night?" I ask her. She's still stepping pretty light, even well into the school day.

"I know. It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" she asks, smiling at me. Then her face becomes serious. "You're not about to lean on me over Ben are you? I already know I'm going to get an earful from Carl and Kate. It would be nice if one of my closest friends would be a bit supportive."

"Did it feel right to you?" I ask her.

Without hesitation, Ivy says, "Yes. It did. The only time it has so far." She looks up and to the side briefly, and the smile returns to her face. "Yes. Last night was right."

"As long as that remains true, let me wish you well, then."

“Thank you,” she says, quietly. “I think you’re the only one other than me that kind of gets Ben. I know you don’t like him, but I think you at least understand him.”

“As long as he continues to treat you well, perhaps he will grow on me.”

“He definitely finds you interesting. I don’t think he really has you figured out, but I think he’d like to know a lot more about you.”

Oh, Ivy. Ben certainly would like to know more about me. I am quite surprised he still has not even hazarded a guess about me. Well, the distraction of a pretty woman can do that, I imagine, and that hunter I finally found last night has definitely been on his mind.

“There still seems to be something you are hesitating about, though,” I say to Ivy. “Like you are not completely convinced this is the right thing for you.” Here I am decidedly playing unfair. She is hiding that uncertainty very well. If I hadn’t been out to her circle soon after she had done her divination, I would not be able to see that her words have confidence, but there is a little bit of an act to them.

“Maybe I’m just trying to temper my excitement,” Ivy says. “I mean, this is the first guy that’s really lit a fire in me, but I’m also out of here in a few months. Ben has no idea what he’s doing after he’s done here. Hasn’t applied for colleges yet, doesn’t know if he wants to wander for a while before trying, or if he’ll just go a different route for his future. That frees him up to follow me wherever I go, but is the morning after even the time to be thinking about something like that?”

“Oh, I know.”

“Yeah. You and Rachel had that before she left last year.”

“Following her was not an option for me, though.”

“Yeah,” Ivy says. “But it was the same. You started something when you both knew everything was going to change. Do you regret you two breaking up when she left?”

“No. Nor do I regret having been with her,” I say. “We kept it light, you know. Because the future was so unsettled.”

“She told me. Falling deeply in love with you would have confused everything.”

“Very much so,” I say. “A lot of emotions hit all at once the day you realize you have certain feelings for someone. Then the first time you act on them, they come at you all over again. We had something intense in its own way, despite knowing it was just for a few months. But they were some great months. If we hadn’t looked at it that way from the start, it would have been much harder to part when the time came without things getting very confused and somebody getting hurt very badly.”

“I’m just…” Ivy gestures with her hand, as if trying to pluck thoughts and words from the air. “I know the risks in getting too involved with Ben. Emotionally or physically. But I’ve been so careful and cautious all my life. And now that I’ve opened the door to those feelings I’ve never had before, I’m feeling them like you wouldn’t believe.” She looks at me, and screws her face up into a frown. “I kind of want to take it all. Take everything I’ve denied myself, or not let myself feel or think. I just want to embrace these feelings without reserve or remorse.”

“And you are not sure it is safe to do this with Ben?”

“I don’t worry about Ben hurting me,” Ivy says, just as we get to the classroom. She looks at me again, still with that questioning frown on her face. “I don’t’ know. I have to think some more.” She shakes her head, and heads straight for her lab bench.

This leaves me just dying to know what her question was in her circle the other night. It most definitely was not, ‘Should I take up with Ben?’ It does not seem as if it was, ‘How far should I go with Ben?’

Something tells me that she has not brought this question to her grandmother. And even if she had, I am quite sure Emily would keep the conversation confidential, unless there were something leading to immediate or extreme danger to Ivy. Witches are extraordinarily good at keeping each other’s confidence, and I know that Emily would be especially cautious about anything she told me, even if it were necessary to break the seal for Ivy’s safety. To go out to her circle would do me no good, either. I can guess at generalities by the evidence a spell leaves behind, but no specifics. To watch her perform a divination would give me no insight, as she would like not ask her questions out loud, nor would the answer be audible to any but her.

Plus, and here is perhaps a sign that Kate’s good heart has infected me in some very deep but subtle ways, if Ivy has a question of personal or intimate nature that is of such importance to her that she would seek magical guidance for it, perhaps the right thing to do is to give her privacy around it. Unless and until I see some sign that she is in immediate or extreme danger with Ben.

Ivy is tremendously important. This I know. But she is also a young woman exploring her body and heart for the first time. She deserves the chance to feel all of its joys and risk all of its heartbreak fully and without undue interference. She deserves the chance to take her own leaps of faith, to chart her own course or make her own mistakes as she will.

However, I still love Ivy deeply, and at the first sign that Ben will bring her to harm, the vampire will find out exactly what I am and how powerless he is in the face of my wrath.

Chapter Nine

Ben Wake

It has been more than a hundred years since I’ve felt this way. It is 6:58 p.m. I told Ivy that I would call her ‘tonight’. Does ‘tonight’ mean seven, or eight? I certainly can't call right on the hour. That makes it obvious that I'm fretting over what time ‘this evening’ ends and ‘tonight’ starts. But what a lifetime an hour can be!

I lost a lot of innocence within an hour of meeting Sonia Vătafu. By the time the sun set again, I became immortal and I left for war. By the time I came back from France in 1918 I thought I would never, ever feel a silly schoolboy crush on anybody ever again. I came back from the war, less than twenty years of life behind me, hundreds more in front of me, already old. My sensitivity to the sun set in quickly after I was turned, and my senses heightened in darkness. When they found out how good I was when it came to fighting at night, they were happy to let me sleep all day in a deep bunker and stalk the place between the trenches called "No Mans’ Land" after dusk. It was a good place for something like me, who was no longer a man.

It is now 6:59 pm. Gazing into my past is doing nothing for me. It is not doing anything to bring my future any closer. The first future I’ve looked forward to in a long time.

I already know what I want to talk about when I call her. Prom is coming up. Something I never got to go to. Now I have a chance. I fret

about for as long as I can stand, and at 7:18, I pick up my phone.

"Hey, Ben!" Ivy's voice is bright and cheerful as she answers.

"Ivy. How have you been this evening?"

I hear her sigh. "Carl and I had it out."

"I'm sorry." As much as I don't like Carl, I also take no joy in the loss of a friendship for Ivy. I've made few enough friends, and those that I have had, I've valued greatly. They're not something to cast away lightly.

"I know," Ivy says. "But maybe it's time. I'm moving on at the end of summer, Carl's going to stay here. We're going to drift apart when that happens, so maybe it's better for it to be a quick thing now than a slow thing later. Just grab the bandage and yank it off."

"Well, remember what we talked about last night," I remind her.

"I don't remember much about the talking last night," Ivy says. I can hear the smile in her voice. "I clearly recall being chilly on the back of a motorcycle, and I think some talking happened, and then there was this delicious, delirious blur."

"And then the ride back to take you home was chilly again," I say.

"No. I've never felt so warm in my life."

"Polar fleece is a wonderful thing." I feel a little bit guilty at that. Unless I've recently fed, I generate very little body heat. If we ever have a true future together, I'll have to learn to moderate her expectations on that count.

"Seriously, though," she says, "I do actually remember what we talked about. How many friends you've drifted away from over the years."

"Yes," I say. "If you ever need a sympathetic ear, I have two of them, always available for you."

"Not tonight," Ivy says. "But thank you."

We talk some more, small and inconsequential things. How our classes are going, what shows she’s binging, and what I’m reading. Finally, I can't hold myself any longer. A hundred years alive, and waiting through an hour of small talk to ask a question is undoing me! "Listen. I don't know if this is an inopportune time to ask this, but if the answer is yes, I’ll need some time to make preparations."

"What?" Ivy asks.

"Well. Are you available for Prom?"

"I am not currently going with anybody," she says. I can hear a tease in her voice.

"Would you like a date for it?"

"I'd love one," Ivy says. "So far, no boy has ever worked up the guts to ask me."

"I hardly believe that," I tell her.

"Kate and Nathan are convinced it's because I'm too perfect. Everybody assumes I'll turn them down so they never ask me. I don't believe them, though."

Her best friends are right, though. There is a certain kind of woman who carries herself with such a sense of grace and poise, intelligent and beautiful and profoundly sensible all in one, that simply seems too unapproachable. They find themselves surrounded by friends, but always alone in some ways. Perhaps that was what drew Ivy and me together. We shared that need for a certain affection.

"Enough about them," I say. "I'm trying to ask you to the prom here."

"Are you sure about that? You seem to keep asking me about it."

"I would very much like to go to prom," I say. "Would you accompany me as my date?"

"Yes," she says, without hesitation.

For the first time in a hundred years, my heart leaps up in my chest.

After we hang up, I spend the rest of the night distracting myself from what taking Ivy to prom really means by researching what I must do to prepare myself. Never having been, I discover I have a lot to learn. Clothing for myself, flowers, dinner beforehand – I'll have to find somewhere that I can hide the fact that I do not eat. I imagine she will wear a dress much to fine for a ride on my bike, but I do drive an excellent vintage Mercedes Benz.

Arranging these formal traditions for the event is time consuming, but simple enough to distract me from the other tradition. There is something undeniable about Ivy, something truly rare and unique. For some reason that I don't yet understand, she draws me toward her, not only as Ben Wake, the person, but also as Ben Wake the vampire. If I am drawn to her so strongly, any other vampire that comes across her will also feel the pull.

One thing that is true about the false story I've told Ivy is that my family is very wealthy, and that I wish to have nothing to do with them ever again. I did understate my reasons for wishing to have nothing further to do to them. My family, the Negre clan are not merely terribly dishonest. They are simply terrible, truly evil. Dishonesty doesn't begin to describe them. Sonia Vătafu was a typical Negre, she went out hunting somebody to kill, just for the sake of taking a life. When I amused her enough with that one stray mention of poetry, she claimed me and turned me instead of killing me. But she did not guide me through the trauma of the change. She left me to endure it unsupported, unguided, on the stomach-churning passage across the Atlantic Ocean in a small cargo ship pressed into service as a troop carrier. I arrived in France so ill that I should have been kept in a hospital, but I found out later that one of her agents had some control over the physician that examined me and declared me a coward faking illness to

avoid combat, and I was promptly sent off to the unspeakable mire of mud and blood that was the Western Front in France.

I met one other vampire in the trenches over there, but because Sonia had already claimed me, he could not help me. He knew that she wished me to either live or die as my wits and fate would have it, so he could not aid me in understanding what I was and what that meant.

It was only when I'd managed to not only survive the war, but to use my new-found abilities as a vampire to adapt and thrive, that she took her responsibility as my mama în sânge. She was there in New York to meet my ship when it arrived. She brought me to the rest of the clan and presented me as her protégé, bid them welcome me as one of their own. My survival of combat with the warm impressed them, and they made me into one of their warriors, honing me to fight vampires of other clans and thropes. The training I endured for that was worse, by far, than what I'd endured on the western front.

These thoughts bring something into very sharp focus for me. The Negre will never stop seeking me, so as long as I'm near Ivy, she is at risk. They will smell whatever uniqueness it is that I can detect in her. They will take it from her, and utterly destroy her in the process. The only way I can protect her is to claim her. And the way I claim her is to make love to her. I don't have to feed off of her or turn her. I simply need to make love to her.

Actually, making love to her is not what I really want. I want the two of us to make love together. I want to share that most precious intimacy with her, more than anything. Protecting her from the Negre is merely an added, but vital, benefit.

It is late, and I am a creature of the night. I do not sleep at night anyways, but now that I have admitted to myself how much I love Ivy, and how important it is for me to protect her, I find myself desperately needing

to move around. Any other night, I would go hunt, but tonight, I do not want to take any life, not even one of the animals I have fed on exclusively since the end of the more recent Great War, the one between the vampire clans and the thropes.

I decide to go out anyways. Even if not to hunt, I just need to move my limbs, to go out and see the beauty of the world that is hidden from the night-weak eyes of the warm. All motorcycles these days are built, by law, so that the headlight must be lit whenever the bike is turned on. I'd modified mine with a switch to shut off the light allowing me to ride without artificially illuminating the road in front of me.

I ride first to the river overlook where just the night before I'd first kissed Ivy. Then I ride further down the river valley and up the roads that lead out of it, seeking more places I that could bring her, to kiss her again under the pale light of the moon and stars.

I return home just before dawn. Enough time to sleep off the first hours of daylight before I have to wake for school. This morning when I wake up, there is a certain joy to the routine of acting warm. It’s probably the fact that I have somebody to make myself presentable for. After my long ride the night before, the bike very desperately needs fuel. I leave for school a little early to give myself time to gas up my loyal steed and still catch up with Ivy on her ride in.

As I pull into position behind her, I notice that she's driving a little more relaxed than the first day I encountered her on the road. I still don't know yet why she is such a fearful driver, something that she hasn't told me quite yet. When we arrive at the school parking lot, I make some excuse for us to hurry into the building. I see Carl, see a dozen conflicting emotions flash across his face. He takes the first step toward us, then stops and turns away. Ivy was right. She'd pushed Carl out entirely.

I take one more look at Carl just before we get to the front door. Something way in the back of my mind tells me I need to talk to him. It's a familiar voice. One that doesn't speak to me much but when it does, I have learned to always listen. I ignored it once in France, and it almost cost me my life in an extremely unpleasant manner. I ignored another time, in the late 30s while I was stalking an elder from the Ahlebri clan. I don't ignore that voice anymore.

But I also don't even know how to approach Carl right now. ‘Hey, buddy. Sorry your not-girlfriend dumped you for me. How are you?’

At least I don't need to listen to the voice right now. It doesn't grab me with an immediate urgency, so I dare wait until the end of the day. I beg off from following Ivy home with an excuse that my parents and I have already made dinner plans for the night, but promise her tomorrow we can have the entire evening together. She says her grandmother will be home then, but not to worry, she can handle her.

After the final bell rings, I hurry to get to the end of the hallway where Carl's locker is. He swaps out his books and starts to leave the building. I start to follow, rapidly catching up to him. I reach out to touch him, am about to call his name, when the voice shouts, "Watch!"

I don't quite touch Carl. I don't need to for the sense to work, I just need to be close for a moment. I see an image of Carl, halfway pupped up, trapped mid-transformation in the throes of death. His throat torn out, limbs broken. I know, because sometimes the sense tells me these things. That this is Carl's fate if he stays near Ivy. He's going to be killed by a vampire. I pull my hand away and stop following. My immediate concern is that I will kill him. I can't understand why, though. I know that he will never have Ivy's heart the way I have it today. He's a thrope, but not only is the Truce in effect, but I've sworn off pelting even if it starts again. The things I did

during the Great War between the vampire and werewolves took me too far from myself. I could not stand the powerful darkness dwelling within me. I cannot imagine any scenario in which I would actually harm Carl. He truly believes that I will bring great harm to Ivy, but that opinion is by no means anything I would kill him for. I wonder if perhaps my sense is telling me it would be an act of self-defense. I did see him halfway transformed. But if he were to come at me in wolf form, I would have the time it takes him to change to run from him, get a head start he'd never be able to overcome. No, there is no reason for me to kill him while he pups.

A few other students run into me while I stand still in the middle of the hallway. One of them is polite enough to say something. The rest look at me, daring to make an issue out of it, if they acknowledge me at all. I go lean up against the wall and think. If he remains close to Ivy, great harm will come to him. This I know to be true, for the sense never lies. It will not be me that harms him. This I desperately want to believe.

I do my best to recall the scene, to see if there is some detail that will give me a clearer idea of the exact threat to Carl. It takes me a moment, and I need to replay the image again, but I catch it for sure the second time. The image showed Carl's limbs broken. Since he was still transforming when he died, his hands had not yet fully changed to paws, just very furry, stubby-fingered hands with long, black nails. The right arm was draped across the chest, so that the paw hand rested over the heart, and the first two fingers were crossed. That posture is the calling card of the Negre clan, and it means that they are not done killing yet, just narrowing in on their true prey. The ultimate victim of such a hunt is left in a different position.

Now the meaning of the image is clear to me. My old clan, which I've disgraced by turning away from their murderous and ruthless ways, and which I have rebelled against by fleeing, is seeking more than just me. I

don't know how quickly they will be able to find Stokers Mill – the sense does not tell me to flee now. However, the sense does make it very clear that the more time that Carl spends with Ivy, the more likely they are to use him to get to her. Whatever it is about Ivy that is so unique and attractive to vampires will be sucked out of her, leaving nothing but a joyless, soulless shell behind to linger away, fading imperceptibly across the border between life and death.

I need to brace myself to feeding Ivy more lies to get her to push Carl even farther away, for his own protection and for hers. I need to start closing up my life here in Stokers Mill and create a new identity in some other small town somewhere.

The thought of continuing to be dishonest with Ivy pains me horribly. I realize I cannot do it much longer. I promise myself that on prom night, before I claim her, I will tell her the truth about me, everything, and hope beyond all hope that she will still have me. It has to be done, for if Ivy and I are to have any future together, she deserves to know, and needs to know the truth.

Chapter Ten

Carl Wilson

I'm furious with Ivy about Ben. I'm furious with Ben just for existing. Anger is never good for my kind. The wolf feeds on anger. It's also a full moon tonight. The wolf always pushes hardest to come out when the moon is full.

The wolf would actually be very helpful tonight in tracking Ben's movements over the past few days. I have been close enough to him while partially transformed to truly have his scent now. The wolf could follow his trail, tell me when he's been with Ivy, when he's been hunting, when he's been with other zombies.

It's too dangerous to let the wolf our tonight, though. I'm running too hot to control it if I let it out. I know that if the wolf runs across Ben, there will be a fight. I worry even more that if I run into a pinkie while the wolf is out, that the hunger will be too much for me to contain.

There is so little space, even up here in the mountains around Stokers Mill, where I can let the wolf run free and not have to worry about running into anybody. The wolf does not have a compulsion for human prey, but it does find it the most interesting to pursue.

I lay down and try to force myself to sleep, but that doesn't work. It never works. There is simply no way to will yourself to be tired. I'm still

way too agitated, and cutting myself off from any distraction only amplifies the voices of the things that are bothering me the most.

There is one thing I can do on nights like this. I do not like to do it, but I am prepared for it. I go down to my basement and strip my clothes off. I fold them neatly and put them in a pile on a stool next to the old canning cellar. It's a windowless burrow carved out of the bedrock of the hillside that always stays cool and slightly damp. Before the days of refrigeration, these cellars were used to store home-canned foods, fruits, vegetables, and potatoes. I step into the cellar, and pull the heavy wooden door shut. Inside the cellar is a cage, secured by a combination lock. I have no problem unlocking it in human form, but the wolf's paws are way too clumsy to manipulate the dial, and the wolf's mind is incapable of recalling the digits anyways. Once I'm securely locked in, and I cannot get out unless in human form, I let the wolf off of its leash.

I wake, curled up into a ball on the floor. The clammy conditions leave me shivering with sore muscles and joints. I remember enough of the night before to be thankful that when the transformation reshapes my body, it heals up most superficial injury. Without that added benefit, my arms and fists would be horrible bruised right now, possibly with some of the finger bones broken. This is actually cage number two for me. The first one had bars set far enough apart that I could bite them, and it took many months for the broken teeth to repair themselves, bit by bit, one transformation at a time.

I am filthy. The entire cellar and I reek of urine, sweat, and rage. I am so stiff getting up and my hands are shaking enough that it takes me much longer than it should to open the combination lock on my cell and get a hot shower started. It is only when I'm finally clean and walk upstairs into strong daylight that I look at a clock and realize it is almost noon. I go to

my bedroom to get dressed, and see three tardy calls from the school. I haven't had anything to do with my foster parents for the past few years, pretty much since they realized the Truce was going to hold and there was no longer a pressing need to keep molding me into a zombie slayer. Now that I'm eighteen, the calls simply come to me, and if I can't bring in proof of a doctor's appointment, or a slip from urgent care, it's two days of after school detention for me. Well, Steve owes me a couple days coverage at work for his own detention last week. At least he had a lot more fun earning his than I did.

I call the school back, give them something about being too sick to come in, and not feeling up to sitting in urgent care for a couple of hours to get a note. Now that I've got the rest of the day free, and assuming Ben is in class, I can do some checking up.

Grandma had reluctantly shared the address where Ben lives with his ‘parents’, only under a very strict promise that I would not go there angry. I find the address and take a quick look as I drive past. It's a small home set far back from the highway, right up against the slope of a mountain with some good, large trees around it. Sensible place for a vampire to set up, since it gets shade for a good part of the daylight hours. The problem with places outside of town like this is that there's no place to inconspicuously park nearby if you want to check out the place on foot. It's legal to park anywhere along the particular road where Ben lives, but a lot of these homes are occupied by people that stay home all day and love to watch their neighbors and the happenings on the road. The nearest place I can find to pull in is more than two miles down the road, at a switchback that's got a wide shoulder and a little path down the hill made by generations of high school kids looking for a place to get drunk and get high with a great view. A car parked there in daylight would be a little odd, but nothing far out

enough to raise the attention of the police. Like any teenage boy in Stokers Mill, I keep a camouflage jacket in my car all the time. It's always wise to carry extra warm clothes when you live in the mountains, and camo is the favored color of most of the young guys around here. That, a pair of dark jeans, and just a little bit of the wolf, is enough to let me move through the wooded lots to Ben's place pretty quickly and nearly invisibly.

When I get to his yard, I puzzle out the interior layout by the size and arrangement of windows. It looks like there is one bedroom on the west side of the second floor. There's no way I'm going to climb the wall to look in, so I climb the hillside behind the house to see if I can see in. Of course, being a zombie, he has blackout curtains on his room, and they're drawn.

I set myself to tracking around the house, as close as I dare in full daylight and knowing that the two pinkies living with Ben don't seem to have jobs. I don't know if they're skilled pinkies there for his protection, or just a couple of dupes that will claim to be his parents in exchange for something from him. Probably free room and board if their cover story is weak enough that Grandma could see through it with just the barest amount of work. Professionals in the employ of a vampire always have good answers for those kinds of questions.

Even with a bit of the wolf out, I can't smell any hint of Ben in the backyard. Not surprising, since he does not need to make a transformation to truly use his strengths, so does not need to have hidden approaches or entrances. He is able to just walk out his front door and drive away.

I know that a smart vampire is always careful to never feed hear his home. Still, I do sniff around the mountainside behind his house for a long time, seeking out the scent of something large and dead, or just his zombie stench. I find none, but I also know he is smart. He won’t make it easy for somebody to find him.

I take a slightly different route back to my car, to cover more of the ground near Ben's house. As I come up to the miniature dump of empty beer bottles and cans, I pull the wolf back, and wait a moment to adapt to my changed senses before taking the trail up to my car.

Just as I get to it, I smell something I do not like at all. It is very clearly vampire, but I'm not sure if it's Ben or not. I'm already fully transformed back, so I'm not good at distinguishing individuals by scent anymore, and I'm also working from a brief memory of being up in his face several days ago. The scent is very close to Ben's, but I can neither confirm nor deny that it is actually him.

The way the zombie reek lingers in the air around my car says that the vampire was there for at least a couple of minutes, and not too long ago. It's possible that it saw me at some point and ran off.

I examine my car very carefully. It hasn't been obviously broken into, but there are ways to get into a car that don't leave much of a trace. No damage to it. Looking at the gravel shoulder around it, whoever it was had a very light step. I know that Ben fits that description.

I check the time. I can drive to school and get there before the final bell. I cannot think of any reason to believe that Ben would be near enough to his house just now to have discovered I was in the area, find my car parked here, and then get back to school to act as if he'd been there all day. Ivy certainly would think it's odd for him to just show up in the last ten minutes of class, and would not act normally toward him.

So off to school it is. Where Ben's motorcycle is nowhere to be found in the parking lot, and Ivy walks out of school with just Kate and Nathan. Which makes Ben my best suspect for the zombie that was sniffing around my car.

I still can't figure out how Ben knew that I was checking up on him and where I'd parked. While I'm wondering about this, Kate sees my car and quietly signals for me to wait up. She bids farewell to Ivy and Nathan and heads over to hop into my passenger seat. "Hey Graylock.” I can tell she's upset about something, and using that nickname out of force of habit, not to tweak at me.

"What gives?" I ask.

"Ivy is beside herself with joy right now."

"How is this bad?"

"Ben asked her to prom."

"I assume she accepted?"

"Of course," Kate says. "Ever since they first kissed she's been completely smitten kitten with him."

I try to bite my tongue, but the question jumps out before I can stop it. "Just a kiss?"

Kate looks at me, trying to figure out how to answer that. I’m pretty sure she thinks it's just male jealousy talking. There's much more to it than that, though. More things I know about zombies. I really want to tell her it's not what she thinks it is, but there's no way I’d be able to back that up. I can't even think of a convincing lie for why I’d want to know.

Still, she answers, "Yes. It's just that so far. She's a careful girl, and it sounds like he's at least treating her well and not pushing her or anything."

"Thank you for telling me. About both things." I am able to relax a bit, knowing he hasn't claimed her yet. That means he probably isn't feeding on her either.

Kate is still clearly trying to figure out why she's telling me things and how I'm reacting to the knowledge. Sure, I'm relieved to hear Ivy hasn't

been claimed, but I think that shows in a different way than she'd expect me to feel hearing that some other guy isn't sleeping with the girl I want.

"Carl. I know things have gone sour with you and Ivy. And I really respect that you've backed off since she's asked you to."

"She actually friend-dumped me," I say.

"I know. I'm trying to be, I don't know, polite or something. Just, hear me out, Ok?"

"Ok."

"The thing is, I feel really, really guilty for asking you this, but maybe now that she's pushed you out of her life, you have less to lose than Nathan or I do."

It's my turn to study her face. It takes me just a moment to figure out what she's got in mind. "You want me to scare Ben off, since I can't make things any worse for myself."

Kate winces at being busted, and nods. "Yes. I mean, last week, you really got to him. He doesn't respect anybody around here, unless Ivy can see him acting at it. But I think he's afraid of you."

"He is," I say. But not for the reasons she assumes. And I'm as afraid of a confrontation with him as he is of getting into it seriously with me. Too much risk of damaging the Truce if we come to violence with each other.

Kate is putting me in a rough position by playing on my concerns for Ivy, though. Even now, I will do anything – anything at all – to keep her safe, and Ben is bad, bad news. He has the stink of Negre clan about him, by far the worst of the clans, and the ones that resisted the Truce the longest, and the only ones that have violated it.

"Where is he now?" I ask.

"Somebody backed into his bike. Principal called him just as final period was starting, and he had to go out to meet the wrecker."

There are only two places around he could take the thing. Either home, if he wants to try and repair the damage himself, or out to Bram's Imports, about forty miles down the highway toward Boulder. They're the only place within a hundred miles of here that will touch a foreign bike.

"This is a hard choice for me to make," I tell Kate. "Ivy specifically asked me to stay out of things with her and Ben, and we've got a lot of really close friendship behind us. Plus, there's Grandma. I get into something with Ben, it may ruin everything between Ivy and me, forever, and I'll lose Grandma with it."

"She's told us her grandmother isn't a big fan of Ben at all. Do you think she'd back you up if you ran Ben off?"

That one I can answer immediately and truthfully. "No, she wouldn't. She and I have talked about this before."

"Well, thanks for not jumping me for asking," Kate says.

"I know you're coming from the right place, and you're not asking me to do anything I haven't already thought of," I tell her. "I just made the decision already that I have to let her live her own life, and let her make her own mistakes."

"Ok," she says. I know she wants to try once more to sway me, but doesn't. She just sits beside me in the car, both of us silent, for a little while. I see her nod her head at some internal decision and look at me. She takes my hand in hers. "I'm sorry this whole thing with Ben has cost you your friendship with Ivy. You're a good man, Carl, and I don't want you to think you can't still hang around with me, alright?"

"Alright," I say.

She nods again as part of some internal conversation she's having. "See you tomorrow." She lets go of my hand and leaves the car, minorly flustered. Her scent changed over the course of that conversation. Not that

she was physically aroused or anything, but a note of a different kind of attraction made itself known. Her body language – wolves can read body language very well – also changed. They say little boys always pick on the girls they like the most. It appears the same might be true the other way around.

I hate to admit it, but that little exchange pushed me. Pack is king among the blooded. Kate is part of my pack, and she’s become a closer member just in the last few minutes. She has asked me to defend another member of the pack that is very important to me. It is a powerful call that Kate did not know she just made, but she made it. I feel compelled to answer it.

Less than forty minutes later, I pull into Bram's Imports. I see the zombie sitting around the lobby, watching out the window. He spots me immediately, and I see anger flash across his face.

Ben comes outside to meet me as I get out of my car.

"Why are you stalking me?" he asks.

He doesn't know just how much I'm stalking him now. I decide to keep that to myself for now. As well as the fact that there's apparently another Negre in the area now who seems to know where his house might be.

"I just found out you think you're taking Ivy to prom."

"I asked, she accepted, most of the arrangements have been made."

"Including the private dance afterwards?" I ask.

"None of your business, Carl."

"Ivy is family. It is my business." The wolf wants to join the dance, but I pull his leash up real short. I need to keep my control here.

"She's an adult, and last I heard, has turned her back on you. Unless you're actually playing the part of the long-jilted and jealous suitor, we need never speak to each other again."

"If Ivy survives you, she and I will be kin again." It pains me a little bit, still, to admit that we will never love each other in a non-familial way. But Ivy is worth it to me. Thinking of her as a pack sister now is starting to wear the sharp edges off of that pain.

"Carl," Ben says. "I truly intend her no harm. My interest in her is indeed what it says on the label. I have simply fallen for a lovely woman and would like to have a happy future with her."

"I don't want that future for Ivy," I say, "Or the other one. You know which two I mean." Their only options are for him to turn her, or for her to grow old and die while watching him remain forever youthful.

"You forgot the third option," Ben says. "The one where I run off on her as soon as I can no longer hide the fact that she is aging and I am not."

"How can you claim to love her, knowing that there is simply no happy future for her with you? Nothing good can come of this."

Ben is silent. I realize he has been very civil, very non-threatening to me this entire conversation. It's helped me keep the wolf under control. Maybe that's why he is doing it. Finally, he says, "I haven't worked out everything yet. I don't have much beyond prom mapped out for us. I just know that we are meant to be together. I’m not going to back down on this Carl. Please understand that."

"Claim her now, figure it out later is not how you respect someone you love. Regardless of that stupid fairy tale winds of fate and true love garbage that you seem to believe in. Please, show me more respect than that. I'm holding my temper with you, and I'm not threatening you. Show me the same consideration."

"I am," Ben says. "I know you have studied us in depth. So you know that we can sense short distances into the immediate future sometimes.

Enough to communicate sometimes courses of action that we should and should not take. Yes?"

I nod. He's telling the truth on that count.

"I need to claim Ivy for her own protection."

"I don't believe you," I say.

"I wish you would," Ben says. He looks straight into my eyes, keeps his face toward me the entire time. He's making it easy for me to read his body language. He seems to believe what he is saying.

I still don't have to like it. "We can protect her just fine without you. She's got family, friends, and an entire school that thinks she is the one of the best among us. We look out for our own here," I say. "So, leave. If its vampires threatening her, you brought them here. Go somewhere else and have them all follow you."

"It's not that simple," Ben says. "She's special."

"That's what I just told you. And she's ours. Now get your little ten-speed fixed up and pack it on out of Stokers Mill. Before prom night. Break her heart a little bit now instead of destroying it later."

"Carl," Ben says. He's actually pleading with me.

"No. Get out of town!"

"Whatever it is about her that drew me here will draw others."

"Then deal with them on your way out of town and out of Ivy's life."

"Actually Carl, you're the one who's most immediately a threat to her."

"What?" I ask.

"You know the signs of the Negre?"

"Of course I do," I say.

"My latest sense, and I will swear on anything you ask me to, this is not a lie." He points at me, then crosses the first two fingers of his right hand

and lays them across his heart. "You can't protect her. You'll lead them to her."

He's either telling me the honest truth, or he's done an amazing job of believing one of his own lies. I don't know which yet, but seeing that sign, an indication that I'll be killed to find something more important, really cuts deep into my pride. It's getting harder to keep the wolf down – it is an extraordinarily proud beast.

I turn away from Ben, get into my car, and take a long drive down to Boulder. I need to spend a lot of miles thinking.

Chapter Eleven

Ben Wake

Showing Carl the Negre sign definitely disturbed him. I had guessed correctly that he was taught the signs, but his reaction told me a lot more than that. He didn't think I was just making an idle threat – there was a very immediate fear on his face, but not of me.

I really want to find out more from Carl, but he's walking away, keeping himself tightly under control. I know that it would be a bad idea to keep the conversation going. Carl is walking away before things get ugly between us, the best thing for me to do is to honor that and let him go.

Not long after Carl drives off, Paul arrives to pick me up. "Have you noticed anything unusual around the house over the past few days," I ask him as we're on our way home.

"No," he says. "You asked us to let you know if we ever caught anybody in the yard or loitering around on the road, but we haven't seen anything."

It's only a very small reassurance. If there's a Negre in the area now looking for me, if that's what had unsettled Carl so much, it would be way too careful for a couple of freewheeling artistic types like Paul and Carol to notice it.

I also have to consider that the other vampire may not be hunting me at all, but, as I told Carl, may be drawn to Ivy. That could be why my sense told me that they'd find Ivy through Carl, but gave me no sign of what my immediate fate might be. Finding me here would just be an added bonus.

A hundred years alive, and I'm in love with somebody – genuinely and truly in love – for the first time ever, and now I'm feeling pushed to hurry the relationship along instead of giving it time to grow on its own. This is why I do not believe in fate, regardless of Carl's accusation. If Ivy and I were fated to be together, I wouldn't be wondering if my old clan were at this very moment stalking one or both of us. I would be savoring every moment between now and prom night, deliciously anticipating our first time together, on a night that I could make perfect for her.

Now I just want Paul to drive faster because I need to have a conversation with Ivy that he does not need to overhear.

As soon as we get home, I dash up to my room, barely remembering to thank Paul for coming to get me, and I call Ivy.

"Hey, Ben. How's the bike?"

"Nothing wrong with it that a couple of days waiting for parts and an insurance check won't fix. I should be back on it by this time next week. Plenty of time for you to ride to prom with me," I say.

"I don't think you know very much about how much prom dresses cost, or low long the skirt on mine is going to be. There's no way I'm getting it anywhere near the motorcycle. If my dress doesn't snag in it and kill me, I'm sure it'll get filthy."

"I'll buy you a new one."

"Ben," Ivy says, mostly joking, but with a bit of a stern reminder that we've had this conversation. "I will buy my own dress, and we're going

halfsies on dinner and anything else that may cost money that night. You agreed."

"I did," I say. I love that she is strong willed in that regard, but also wish that she were willing to just let me make the night for her. It's our senior year, and the only year she's got a date for prom. I want to make it magical for her.

More than anything, though, I need to make sure she is under my protection before then. The Negre are horrid beasts, but even they cannot violate another vampire's claim on a mortal. Not while that vampire still lives. That is why they forbid anybody in the clan from making a claim without permission from the head of the clan. It is too powerful even for them to undo. Still, the protection has its limits. No other vampire will be able to physically harm her, feed on her, or turn her as long as I live, but there are ways to torture somebody without ever touching their body. The Negre are very good at those twisted arts.

What I say next is a gamble, a huge risk that would be foolish of me to take if I hadn't seen the way she's acted around me since our first kiss. "Can I treat you to a special evening tonight, instead? A night where I get to completely spoil you."

"What do you have in mind?" she asks. It seems like she's receptive of the idea.

"I want to get out of town tonight. I know that I've had a hard time of fitting in here, and it's just getting to me a bit, especially since you and I are now a thing. There's a place up at the top of Harker's Pass that I see when I'm out riding that looks like it has really nice rooms. It's Friday, so neither of us has school tomorrow. We can have a night together, just us, without being in a big room full of people that are judging us first."

Ivy pauses, then asks, "You, uh, want me. Tonight?"

"I’ve wanted you for quite some time now."

"I know. And I want you, too."

"But?"

"But. On the one hand, I don't want to rush things," she says.

"On the other hand?"

"You've lit a fire in me, Ben."

"You've lit one in me, too. Like nobody has ever lit me up before."

"Grandma just got home, and I'm making dinner for us now. I really hate to mention his name to you right now, but I really need to tell her about what happened between Carl and me. Can I call you back at seven, and let you know how I'm feeling? I really want you. Like, you would not believe how much I want you right now, but I also want my first time to be at the right time. Just let me have my dinner and unpleasant conversation with Grandma, and if it's still feeling right, we’ll do this tonight. Ok?"

It is very easy for me to agree to the delay. Her having dinner before meeting me means I don't have to fake my way through it. It gives me time to feed so my body will be warm. "That is fine," I tell her. "I'll call the inn and see if they can pencil us in for tonight. I hope everything goes well with your grandmother this evening."

"Thank you," she says.

Fortunately, the Harker's Pass Inn has room, being in the small low season between the winter tourists that come for the skiing, and the summer ones that come to hike and camp the mountains. I book the deluxe suite with the whirlpool tub.

I rush out as quick as I can and find prey in the hills above my house. It gives me enough fresh blood in my system to have a strong pulse and some color for at least a day. I clean up, brush my teeth, and try to find an outfit that looks nice without seeming out of place for a couple of young people

renting a room in a rural hotel. I settle on a pair of classic black dress trousers with a leather belt, royal blue button-down shirt, and a simple tone on tone black necktie.

At seven, precisely, Ivy calls. "I'm yours tonight," she says. By quarter to eight, we are showing the desk clerk at the inn our IDs to prove we are both old enough to be spending the night in a room together.

We go up to the room, and I don't think Ivy notices anything about it. As soon as I close the door behind me, her overnight bag is on the floor, and her lips are on mine.

Chapter Twelve

Nathan Marsh

“What was that about?” I ask Kate, as she comes back from Carl’s car.

“I told her about Ben taking Ivy to prom. He wasn’t happy about it, but seemed less angry than I thought he might be. Found out she’s completely shoved him out of her life, too, so it’s doubly surprising he didn’t lose it.”

“Poor guy,” I say. This thing with her and Ben has really cost him a lot.”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “I don’t really feel proud of this, but I asked, since he can’t make things any worse, if he could maybe push at Ben harder. I don’t know what I was thinking. I can’t imagine that making anything better for anybody.”

“Was he smart enough to turn you down?” I ask.

“Yes, actually. Took that pretty calm, too. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew it was kind of a dumb thing to ask, so I’m glad he didn’t just jump me.”

“Who would have thought that this kind of adversity would bring out a new maturity in our Carl?”

Kate nervously chuckles at that.

“Where is he going now?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Didn’t say.”

“Nothing stupid, I hope, since you are no longer with him.”

“You think he might have just been putting on a calm face until I got out of the car?”

“He did take off quite quickly after you got out,” I say.

Kate frowns. “Nah. I’ve seen him try to hide his temper before. This was different. He was thinking a lot, distracted. Something else was on his mind.”

Now it is my turn to think, to turn things over in my mind. What new piece of information has Carl gained during his day off from school? Where is he headed off to?

“Let’s go,” Kate says, breaking me out of my distraction.

Whatever Carl is up to, I will not figure it out sitting in the school parking lot, and I cannot pursue any ideas with Kate in the car.

“Right,” I say, and drive us home. As I start to pull out of the parking lot, I see Kate looking up and down the road, looking for something. Wherever Carl went, there is no chance she would still be able to see his car, but I know that she is looking for it. Methinks she wants to know where he is as well, but for much different reasons than I do.

By the time I get us home, spend enough social time with the family to be polite, and get out of the house again, at least an hour has passed. I get back into my car and decide that Carl will need to get himself home sooner or later. Whether I choose to talk to him or not will depend on what mood he looks like he is in when I see him.

I park a good distance from his house and make my way over there on foot, through the woods that run behind the properties along his road. When I get up to his back fence, I see that his car is still gone, and there is no lingering scent or sense of him around the place. I carefully sneak into his yard. Coming up to his back door, I pick up the reek of a night in the cage

in his canning cellar. So he had let the wolf out for a while last night. That could be part of why he was so calm while talking to Kate, but I know him. Letting the wolf out provides only very temporary relief, especially so close to a full moon. It must have been whatever he had learned during that day that kept him more curious than furious.

Almost as if to answer my question, I hear the throaty exhaust of a big single. I duck down behind Carl's trash bins, and I see an orange and black motorcycle come up the road. I am completely unsurprised to see the bike, after my recent jaunt up to Wyoming. It slows and stops, just two doors down from Carl's house. The rider dismounts and pulls her helmet off, and I finally catch my first actual look at the vampire hunter I've been hunting. She has mid-length, full, dark hair, just a little bit wavy. Her eyes are piercing and sharp. I can tell this even at a distance in the very brief time it takes her to pull a pair of sunglasses out of a pocket in her jacket. Her skin pale like all vampires, but not as severe as most. She is probably Latina, if I had to guess. She looks like she was older than most when she was turned, possibly forty or so, but it is only the face that gives her away. The rest of her body moves with the kind of youthful grace that most vampires develop from their long years of living without aging.

The hunter takes her phone from its handlebar mount and digs a paper map out of her tank bag. She wants to look like she is verifying the two against each other, but she spends way too much time leaning her head back a little bit back and tilting it, using some of her vampiric senses, and looking at Carl's house.

As she stands there, I can see her getting increasingly agitated. One of her hands constantly goes to her right thigh. Whether it is a knife or a gun she has tucked inside of her riding pants, I do not know, but her constant

need to reassure herself the weapon is there is a big tell. She very clearly does not like this new knowledge that there is a werewolf in Stokers Mill.

Finally, she puts her phone up to her ear. I have very acute hearing by mortal standards, but not sharp enough to eavesdrop on someone speaking quietly at the distance between us, especially with her hand carefully placed in front of her mouth. What few syllables I do catch seem Romanian, which does not surprise me at all. The Negre use it almost exclusively when speaking with each other.

She calms some while talking to whomever is on the other end of the call, but she is still unhappy by the time she finishes. With one last look at Carl's house, she starts folding up her map. I want to follow her to see where she goes next. My car is a good quarter of a mile down, pulled off the road into a tree-lined drive to an empty vacation home. There's no way I'll be able to get to it before she gets the bike started and takes off. Even if I were to shed my mortal form, I would never make it.

Likewise, I am fast when not burdened by this body, but not fast enough to keep up with a motorcycle. Especially not something like she drives. I am quite sure she would be able to take these curvy mountain roads at quite a respectable clip on that Duke. I could take to the air and go straight line where she cannot, but it is full daylight. The power required to remain unseen and the physical strength needed to fly would rapidly exhaust me.

I need to slow her down somehow. By letting go of the mortal coil just a little bit, I gain some access to my more useful powers. As the vampire hops into the saddle and starts the machine, I let my eyes become more raptor-like, able to focus on small objects at a distance. I home in on the valve stem of her front tire. As she drops the bike into gear, I use my telekinesis to give it a very sharp yank sideways, enough to split the rubber.

With a loud popping sound, the air in the tire bursts free just as the bike starts rolling. The sudden sponginess of the front tire as it deflates throws her handling off, but as I had suspected, she is a very skilled rider and effortlessly regains control.

To her credit, she manages to keep her temper under control at this sudden turn of events. She squats down beside the front tire to take a look at the problem. This gives me time to return to my completely mortal form, sneak out of Carl's backyard, and sprint for my car. By the time I catch up to her, she is pulling something out of one of her metal saddlebags. I pull in behind her.

"Need a hand with anything?" I ask, walking up to her. I see that she has a small electric air pump in her hand. Sitting next to the front wheel is a little tire repair kit, and the broken valve stem.

"Nope. Had to make a quick fix, now I just need to pump up and roll," she says, giving me only the quickest glance, but one that clearly gave me a head-to-toe assessment.

"Need me to follow you a bit, make sure the fix takes?" I ask.

While she plugs the pump into a socket near the motorcycle's engine, she gives me another appraising look. "I'll be fine. This isn't the first time I've had to do this – I ride some pretty rough trails on this beast."

I let myself take another look at the motorcycle. The crash bars guarding the engine are scratched and scored, and there are dents on the muffler. Her riding pants look like they have seen more than their share of thorns and brush, and the shift lever looks almost brand new, as if replaced recently. A little bit of greenery is stuck in the latch of one of her saddlebags, and the seat is discolored by plenty of worn-in dirt. There is clearly no false bravado in her words.

“Well, I hope the rest of your ride is without incident. However, you will lose mobile signal entirely just after you start down that slope there,” I say, pointing to where the road starts switching back down toward the river. “Watch for a house in the most unpleasant shade of green you have ever seen. If something happens and you need to call for assistance, if you are above that house, it will be much easier to walk up here to get signal. Otherwise, make your way downhill until you can see the river.”

“Thank you much,” she says, attaching the air hose to the new valve stem. Then, she turns on some serious charm. Some unnatural charm. “This is why I live out in the country, not the city. People think about things like that. Have yourself a wonderful day, my friend.”

I know when a vampire is trying to dismiss me. I know how to pretend it worked. Something in the walk while turning away.

As I drive off, I find myself reformulating a plan. Until I saw the air pump in her hand, I did not realize one could replace a broken valve stem right on the side of the road without any tools: just the right supplies and some skill. Now I will need to find some other way to track her. She has seen my car, and if she is any good at all – and if she is a Negre hunter, she is very good – she will recognize it immediately if she sees it again today.

The best thing for me to do now is to find out if she is narrowing in on Ivy. She will either do that by discovering where Ivy lives, or by finding Ben. As I roll down the road, I wait until I see the river so I can call Ivy’s grandmother.

“Emily, good evening.”

“What’s up?” she asks. I can hear the concern in her voice. I despise electronic communications and only use them when absolutely necessary.

I tell her about the Negre hunter I just saw by Carl’s house, and that I made the mistake of showing myself to her.

“Bad choice,” Emily says. “You know how paranoid they are. Once is happenstance, twice is enemy action.”

“She would find herself sorely outmatched,” I remind her.

“Don’t feel like hiding a body today, though?”

“The body is the easy part,” I tell her. As long as there is sunlight available, getting rid of a dead vampire is a problem that solves itself. For as much as a technophobe as I am, the Negre have learned to embrace all sorts of technology and the bureaucracy of daily existence. They have the serial numbers of any property their hunter owns flagged in any database they can get into. Her phone sends its GPS data to them, and she checks in regularly using a complex set of signals to indicate whether she is safe, concerned, or in distress. There are not enough Negre to be constantly monitoring all of their hunters in real time, but if she were to miss a check in, they would immediately start reconstructing her motions and actions and send other hunters to investigate.

After I dispatched the other Negre in the area, just outside of Ivy’s yard back in January, I spent the better part of the next six weeks constructing a fiction to make it look like it was a completely random encounter. For the most part, my kind kill vampires on sight, so I needed to do nothing to obscure the act itself. It was creating a false trail afterwards, to create the illusion of a transient that just happened to come across a vampire that took a lot of effort and creativity. If the Negre knew that I lived in Stokers Mill, they would come for me in numbers that would significantly tilt the odds in any violent encounter to their favor, and would certainly learn of the existence of both Ben and Ivy in the process.

“It would be better if I could get this one to turn her attention elsewhere,” I say to Emily. “Before she can confirm that Ben lives here, or catches even the slightest hint of Ivy’s presence.”

“Carl told me that Kate wants him to lean on Ben, get him out of town entirely.”

“But that would just push him closer to her,” I say.

“Precisely. And I have done some work about removing Ben from the equation entirely,” she says.

I remember our previous conversation, where she had pondered that out loud, and how I had to put a stop to that line of thought.

I am about to say something, when she continues, “We can’t. I did some very deep scrying last night, and as much as I hate to admit it, their futures are entwined in ways that we should not disrupt.”

It relieves me that Emily will no longer push me to get rid of Ben, and that her sense that he is important is starting to match mine. I want to ask what future she has seen, but I know better. Never ask a witch what is going to happen. Even the cleverest among my kind are inevitably trapped by the machinations of fate when they peer into tomorrow that way.

“At the very least,” I tell Emily, “Be on your guard. I think I will find some way to get eyes on Ben’s house to see if she finds her way there next. I need you to make sure this one stays away from Ivy.”

“I’ll get somebody to cover my overnight later this week, so I won’t be too far from home until we get this settled,” she says.

I continue driving toward town, and realize it has been quite some time since I have stolen a car.

Chapter Thirteen

Ivy Sparks

I want Ben, and I want this. I really do, but I'm so nervous. I've never gone farther with a guy than just making out. Nobody has ever touched me intimately or seen me in anything less than a swimsuit. I've never had my hands on any part of a man's body but his shoulders or back. So much of what I'm about to do is such a mystery to me. I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to do. Probably the best thing is to just let Ben take charge. The first time we kissed, he was very respectful, seemed to be constantly watching my reactions to things and not pushing any farther than I was comfortable. I know I can trust him to treat me well, but I also don't want to just lay there and react. I want to make sure he understands that I'm not just letting him have me. That this is something I want to share, as an equal partner, with him.

I make him tell me about the most beautiful night sky he's ever seen while he drives.

"Two years back," he says. "I went out camping over on the other side of the Rockies, southern Oregon. The park was completely off-grid. Miles from a paved road, food in bear bags up in trees, all of that. I was out with a couple of friends, and we didn't know when we left that a major meteor shower was supposed to happen while we were out there. One night it was

warm enough that we didn't need a fire, we just laid ourselves out on our backs as the sun set and the stars came out as the sky darkened."

Ben squeezes my hand, and goes on. "Then one of us saw a shooting star, then another, and another. We were unable to move, almost unable to blink because we didn't want to miss a single one. None of us slept until something like three or four in the morning."

"Thank you," I say. "A lot of the time, especially this last year with college coming up, I find myself itching to get away from here, off to someplace bigger and with more people. I always seem to forget that I'm closer to the world out here, closer to the sky."

"I think that no matter where you go, you will always have a home here to come back to. Any time you need a sky full of stars, you just need to take some time to come back," Ben says.

"True," I say. "I just worry that I'll forget to do it."

"You won't. This place is too much a part of you. I've always been able to see that."

Just a few minutes more of driving, and we pull up to the inn. We get the eye from the clerk about checking in, but we're both grown up. For a moment, I'm rattled at having to deal with this annoying detail, but then I realize that I'm mere moments from enjoying my life infinitely more than the sour faced clerk that looks like he hasn't smiled in weeks. That proof that I am alive and beautiful and precious to someone builds up inside of me. By the time Ben unlocks the door to our room, I am ready to have him right there at the threshold. I drop my overnight bag on the floor and am kissing him before he even gets the door shut.

I hold him tight while he embraces me and returns the kiss as hungrily as I give it. There's a part of me that is almost audibly screaming for any touch right now. I clamp one of his thighs between mine and start rubbing

against him. Anything to scratch that itch I've got right now. Awkwardly, since my legs trying to hold onto one of his, I try to walk backwards and drag him towards the bed that I know must be somewhere behind me. Instead of following, he plants his feet and breaks away from the kiss.

Ben puts one hand on each of my cheeks and looks at me with those intensely blue eyes of his. I'm suddenly a little bit embarrassed at how physically assertive I suddenly became. He knows I've never been with anybody before, but I don't want to think that just a couple of days of playing kissy-face together and a hotel room are all it takes to make me into that kind of girl.

The look on his face, though, reassures me that everything is good. There is such adoration as he studies me up close in the dim light. He kisses me once on the lips, lightly, on the forehead, on the top of my head. I realize he's slowing me down so we can do this properly, explore the many ways we can pleasure each other instead of just tearing off clothing and skipping right to the end.

Instead of taking me to the bed, Ben leads me to the sofa and sits down beside me. We start to kiss again, wandering between gentle and insistent. His hands start to wander over my chest and before long, I'm back to wanting to tear my clothes off for him again. I decide to let him lead, though, let him enjoy the slow reveal of my body to him. It's hard, though. So hard to be patient and move at his pace.

He starts unbuttoning my blouse, far enough to open it up and see what I've got on underneath. I try to apologize for not having something really sexy for him yet, but he seems rather happy with the lacy, dark green set that I've always thought looks great on me. I am now well into territory I've never been in before, and the excitement fills me with a renewed need for him. I fumble with his necktie. I have no idea how to start loosening it, but

Ben is kind enough to handle it for me, and undo his top button. He goes for a second, but I'm having none of that. He gets to unwrap me, I get to unwrap him. It takes all the self-control I can muster to not just grab his shirt and tear it open, sending buttons flying everywhere.

Once I get his shirt off, I run my hands all over his chest. I have never thought of him as bulky, but I've also noticed over time that he is strong. Now that I'm touching his bare skin, I can feel that he is solid underneath. Compact. Like there is not a single muscle that is wasted for show, all of it is in this majestic landscape of lean, toned power. I'm so wrapped up in exploring it that I don't realize he's taken my blouse off until I feel my bra suddenly loosen, freeing my breasts. I lean forward a bit and let the bra fall off. He leans back to get a good look at me, then comes in to kiss again, his lips and tongue freely wandering over my lips, my cheeks, behind my ears, down my neck. Oh, those kisses to my neck are glorious! I have never seen the thrill in neck kissing until Ben – he brings such a fascination and careful attention to the task that it takes my breath away every time. The only thing I'm feeling more intense than that is the alternation between us crushing our bare chests together, as if we're trying to touch directly heart-to-heart, and the electric tingle every time he touches one of my nipples

Now the fire between my legs is blazing out of control, and I can no longer control my hips. My body is desperately aching to have him inside of me. I am about to go for his belt when he lifts me up and drops me onto his lap. Oh, how solid he is! I smile up at Ben and wiggle my hips to let him know I notice.

He wraps an arm around my back and stands up, carrying me to the side of the bed and gently lays me down. My legs are still together from the trip over, so he puts one hand on either of my knees and puts just enough pressure on to make it a polite invitation to open my legs for him. I notice

him looking down at my body, and suddenly become inexplicably shy about him seeing my most intimate parts yet. I don't know exactly why – I still desperately want to feel him inside of me there, but also want to preserve some mystery about my body for a little while longer. When I separate my knees for him, I also lower my thighs so he cannot see up my skirt.

He allows me that bit of modesty yet, but fortunately it does not stop him from going further. While Ben undoes his belt, I settle a little more comfortably on the bed. He kicks off his shoes and opens his pants, taking a bit of time in lowering them to the floor and stepping out of them. And now he is standing before me, at the edge of the bed, one of my calves on either side of him, showing me all of his glory. I take the time to admire everything, from the legs – just as finely and cleanly muscled as his torso – up to that most personal part of him. It is stiff, and I can see it bounce a tiny bit with every beat of his heart. I am simply amazed at how beautiful it is, how vital it looks. I always thought it would look like some separate and alien creature attached to the man, but on Ben, it is wholly a part of him.

He places his fingertips behind my knees, and again pulls just enough to invite me to lift and open them for him. This time, I do not mind that my skirt rides up my thighs, exposing my panties to him. I reach out with my feet, running them up and down his thighs, then I pull him toward me.

Ben climbs up onto the bed, straddling me, running those gently shocking fingers of his up and down my legs, along my sides, over my breasts. I can tell by his breathing now that he will not be able to wait much longer. He reaches a hand behind me, and unzips my skirt.

"Lights, please," I ask, still needing the cover of darkness to truly and fully relax so I can take him. I enjoy every second of the trip his naked body takes to the light switch before the room goes black. Once the lights are out, I slip out of my skirt and drop it on the floor. Ben finds his way back to me,

and straddles me again. Sometimes, he almost lowers himself onto me, at others, he hovers a few inches above me. I need to raise my hips then, because even with one last item of clothing on, I cannot bear to not have my most secret part too far from him.

I'm just about to demand that he take me already when his hands go to my waist and he removes that final piece cloth between us. I take the opportunity to crawl up the bed and rest my head on the pillows. However, Ben does not follow and climb right up on top of me. Instead, he lays down beside me and starts kissing me again, one hand cupping my bottom and the side of my hip. I try to hide a little sigh of disappointment, but at the same time, I realize by the way he is breathing now, that he's afraid he'll have no endurance if he enters me now. When his hand comes around to the inside of my thigh, and starts making its way upwards, I can tell he wants to give me a little bit of pleasure first. I open myself up fully for him and settle in a bit to enjoy the focused attention. He explores the outside of me first, stroking the soft fur between my legs, the surprisingly sensitive skin right where my inner thighs meet my body, walking up from there to the points of my hips and then back down.

Ben then starts to play at the entrance to my body, finding that little spot right at the top that makes my back arch and my breath catch in my throat. He lets his fingers dance, studying my every reaction, narrowing in on the touch that gives me the most torturously sweet amount of pleasure. He carefully teases me, then I feel his fingers slip inside. He renews his wordless conversation with my body, this time not teasing at all, but following every single twitch and wiggle and moan of pleasure I make, building up the excitement within me higher and higher until I simply stop thinking about what he is doing, and just let my body respond to him. I have no idea if I am making any sound or saying anything when he brings me to

the point of no return and his nimble, strong fingers shove me clear over the edge. All I know is that I have my legs locked tight around his hand and I can't breathe because I am smothering myself in his shoulder.

"Please!" I beg. "Please. Now."

Ben crawls up on top of me again, his thighs between mine, his arms on either side of me. I reach down to take him into my hand, thinking to guide him in, but I'm distracted by the feel of him. Now that I'm touching him, it is not as rock solid as I thought, but yields slightly to my touch. It's hot in my hand, and I can feel his pulse, fast, strong, and steady.

"Now?" Ben asks reluctantly because he wanted to tell me everything before he claimed me, but my patience wore thin and I knew that all I wanted was him right now.

"Please," I say.

I let go of him and put my hands on his lower back. He settles onto me, so we are belly to belly and chest to chest. I roll my hips back and lift my thighs a bit, opening them as wide as I can. The pain I'd heard of is not there when Ben enters me, just an insistent pressure as he pushes his hips forward. He fills me completely, there is no part inside of me that Ben is not touching. My body feels like it can barely contain him, like something will have to give.

I finally exhale, long and slow, as I let myself relax around him. I find myself in a world of pleasure I never could have imagined. "Thank you," I whisper into his ear.

That's when I notice that his body is slowly quivering. If his reactions are anything like mine, I suspect he's just a heartbeat away from his own peak, and I appreciate more deeply the time he spent letting his hand explore and pleasure me. While having him inside of me is so divinely

delightful, I want more from this moment. I want to be taken up to and over that edge again from these new sensations.

When his breath settles, he starts to pull back his hips, sliding slowly out of me. I feel less full as he does so, and for a moment fear that he's going to leave me entirely, but he stops just as the head of his shaft reaches the entrance to my body. His mouth goes to my neck again, to that spot right at the base of my throat where he is able to kindle a mighty flame with his kisses and nips. He toys with me there, stoking the fire within me until my hips demand he fill me again. Ben listens, and slowly presses into me. A half dozen more thrusts, all the while with his mouth working its magic, and we've found the rhythm my body craves. Every single thrust he makes, bringing his hips all the way into mine, all of him buried deep inside of me, I take another step up the mountain. I can hear in his breathing that he is doing everything he can to delay for me, and that only heightens my own pleasure. It takes just a couple more steps up, and I feel the explosion of pleasure start from deep within me, bursting outwards, up my spine until again I lose all sense of reason and time. Every inch of my skin comes alive at once. I grasp onto Ben with all my might, lest the pleasure throw me completely out of this world and into some other place. I need his solid anchor to hold on to, the sensations driving through me are so intense.

I come back to awareness just in time to see his eyes completely lose focus while he's gazing deep into mine, and he lets out this powerful moan, teeth clenching, and he wraps his arms around me as desperately as I was just holding him.

It takes a long time for my hips to stop lightly grinding against his body, trying to keep that pleasure going. Eventually, he softens and my body gently pushes him out.

I am simply exhausted, beyond measure. It is all I can do to say, "Good night, my love," before I fade.

In the morning, Ben lets me sleep until nine, the curtains shut tight against the morning light, before he wakes me with the sound of running water. It's the first I notice that we have whirlpool in the room. He's obviously been up for a while, because I can see that there's also a plate of fresh fruit, flatbread, and brie set next to a cup of hot coffee by the edge of the tub. I find myself much more comfortable this morning with the thought of Ben seeing me completely unclothed, so I don't bother to cover up as I leave the bed and step into the tub. I enjoy a leisurely breakfast in a hot bubble bath with my sexy man before we dry off and return to the bed.

Once more, I take Ben inside of me. Even though I know a little more what to expect, it is no less magical with him than it was last night. When we're finished, we take a quick shower together, so we can be dressed and ready to go before check out time. I really wish Ben had woken me up earlier, because our giggly fun soaping each other up makes me want to seriously explore every inch of his body with his hands, and get things started again.

As we leave the inn, Ben immediately puts on very dark sunglasses, adjusts his hat, and walks with his head down. Once we're in the car, he immediately swings the visor down to block the sun, and I notice just how dark the tinting on his windows is. Not for the first time, I wonder if he isn't so pale because he has a sensitivity to sunlight.

Ben holds my hand while he drives me home. I can tell he's taking his time to stretch out our morning together. Truth be told, I don't mind at all. As we get closer, I start getting nervous. I rushed out the door without telling Grandma where I was going, and she's not going to be happy when she sees who I was with all night.

We're not far from my house. Ben is slowing down for a left turn, then suddenly abandons it, speeding up and continuing straight down the highway.

"What was that all about?" I ask.

"Sorry. There was a cat crossing the road there. If I had started the turn, my two options would have been to hit the cat, or stop in oncoming traffic, and risk your side of the car getting hit."

"No worries. Take Highland Avenue. First left after we cross 325."

"Right," Ben says. Almost hitting a cat must really be bothering him, because he seems very distracted right now.

He does make the turn, though, and follows the rest of my directions to the house, but his eyes are all over the place as he drives. We finally pull into my driveway. I spend a long time saying goodbye to him, between kissing him and simply not wanting to face Grandma.

"Putting it off isn't going to make it any easier," Ben says, reluctantly. He's still distracted by something. I can tell he's watching up and down the road.

"I know."

"Go. We'll see each other again soon." He reaches across me to open my door, giving me a nice, deep kiss as he settles back down in the driver's seat.

"Soon," I say, giving him one more quick peck before I get out of the car.

As I expected, Grandma is extremely unhappy with me. I can't stand seeing how disappointed she is in me. The worst part being that I don't deserve it. Just because she doesn't like Ben doesn't mean I'm not allowed to fall in love with him or make love with him.

"Ivy," Grandma says.

I take a deep breath. I'm suddenly angry that somehow I've ended up in a position where two of the three most important people in my life hate the third. "Yes, I spent the night with Ben."

"Where?"

"In his arms," I snap.

Grandma seems taken aback by me fighting her on this.

I push into the opening that leaves me. "I'm a big girl now, and I've been halfway taking care of myself for the past few years anyway, with you being on the road a few days every month."

"That boy is no good for you. You need to stop seeing him, now, not get closer to him! There's a lot about him you don't know."

"We've been over this already, Grandma. I'm grown up now. This is my body," I say, bringing one of my hands up to chin level, and sweeping it downwards in front of me. "My heart, my decision, my life."

"This isn't just a simple matter of me disapproving of a sketchy boyfriend. Ben is something different."

"Yes, he is. And we all know how nice little Stokers Mill feels about anything that's different. I can't wait to get out of this tiny cage of a town."

"It's not that, Ivy."

"I don't want to hear it," I say, and I stomp up to my room, slamming the door behind me.

I pull out my phone to see a text from Ben: 'You forgot your bag. Sneak out and meet me at Fordham?'

Oh, dear Ben. Always proper English, even in a text message. Seeing him again sounds so good right now that even without needing to pick up my overnight bag, I'd jump at the invitation. I text him that I'll see him in a few minutes.

I was always a good kid when I was younger, so I don't have much practice sneaking beyond what I've done very recently, and we do have that squeaky step. "Time to go all out," I tell myself, and open up my window. I find a quarter in my purse and use that to open the clips that hold the storm window in. I carefully lean the pane of glass up against my bedroom wall and crawl out the window. Gently, I lower myself down so I'm holding onto the sill. It should only be four feet of drop, but it still takes me a second of steeling my nerve to let go.

I hit the ground and fall into an undignified heap. My phone is still upstairs in my purse, but there's nothing in it I need to spend a little bit of time with Ben. I assume Grandma is in the den, so I pick a route to the road that keeps me out of sight of those windows, and walk down to Fordham Avenue.

I hop into Ben's car and go straight for a kiss. He returns it quickly, puts the car into gear, and starts driving.

"What's going on?" I ask. This is very unlike him.

"I need to get us both out of town, now."

"Why" I ask.

"After I dropped you off, I took another circle around the neighborhood. They've almost found you. Your grandmother can't protect you, Carl can't protect you. I can, but only if we stay together and stay hidden."

"What are you talking about, Ben? You're scaring me!"

"You should be scared," is all he says, his eyes twitching constantly between the road in front of him, and his mirrors.

"Ben. Tell me what this is about."

"I was going to tell you this today, anyways. I promised myself I had to tell you once we became lovers."

“What, Ben?” I shout. I am terrified of him and so angry right now. If he weren’t speeding down the highway, I’d get out of the car.

Ben turns to me, and opens his mouth.

I can’t believe what I’m seeing. It looks like the most perfect set of costume vampire fangs I’ve ever seen in my life, and I never saw him put them in.

“Touch them. They’re the real thing,” he says, facing front to watch the road and his mirrors again.

I reach between his parted lips and touch one of the fangs. I press on it, and it doesn’t move like a prop would. He slips off his sunglasses and looks at me. The whites of his eyes are now blood red, his glacier-blue irises have turned black and glassy, a frightening rattle escapes from his throat.

“Watch,” he says, making a quick check of the road. His fangs retract, looking like his teeth have always looked. His eyes go back to normal. “I’m a vampire, Ivy. I’m a rebel against the most powerful and evil clan of my kind, and for some reason, they are drawn to you. I was hoping they weren’t as close as they are, but one of them is definitely narrowing in on your house. She’s close enough that she’ll find it tonight after the sun sets.”

I have no idea what to say to any of this, no idea what to think. “Call your grandmother, tell her to get out of the house, preferably out of town entirely for a few days,” Ben says. “Tell her, ‘Negre hunters’ and she’ll know how important it is.”

“My phone is at home,” I say.

Ben fishes his phone out of a pocket and hands it to me. “Here. Be quick, and then throw the phone into the river as we cross the bridge up there.”

I still can’t process any of this. I can’t figure out where to even start. Ben puts his phone in my hand. “Please, Ivy. Trust me and do as I say. I

don’t want to make you do it.”

I have no idea what Ben is talking about.

“Please, Ivy. Call her and throw the phone in the river. You’ve got less than a minute.”

I stare at the phone, dumbfounded.

Ben turns to me. He puts a hand on my cheek. “Ivy,” he says.

I look up into his eyes of blood and obsidian, see his fangs are out again. “Call, now. Destroy phone,” he says in a voice that is pitched unnaturally deep. It seems to echo inside of my head.

I can’t stop myself from dialing Grandma’s number. I put the phone to my cheek and listen to it ring and ring and ring until I get her voicemail. She never picks up on numbers she doesn’t recognize.

“Grandma. Ben says you need to get out of town right now, and stay away for a few days. Something about Negre hunters. It seems important to him, and I believe him. I love you.” I hit the End button, roll down the window, and as we’re at the peak of a bridge over the river, I throw the phone out.

“Please don’t ever make me do that to you again,” Ben says. He’s back to the Ben I’d slept with last night. There is so much pain in his eyes now, in every glance he dares make at me that I at least believe he did not want to do whatever it was he did that made me obey him. He certainly didn’t do it last night. I never felt the same pull when he kissed me or undressed me that I just felt when I made the call and threw the phone away. He takes his right hand off of the steering wheel and sets it between us, palm up. An invitation.

I cannot deny that he is what he claims to be. I’ve seen him change twice now, I felt the force with which he made me obey his commands. I also cannot deny that up until he did that, I never once felt unsafe with him,

threatened, manipulated, controlled. Just that one time he scared me driving like a madman on the highway, but I think that was him not knowing how stunting in traffic affects me. It was bad judgement on his part, not bad faith. I now know my lover's secret. I have to decide if I can still love him despite it. I have to decide if I can trust that I am in danger, and that it's not because I fell in love with him. There is a lot I need to figure out. Fast.

I think back to every time Ben has touched me or kissed me. Never before have I felt as safe and protected as I did when I fell asleep in his arms last night.

I place my hand in his, and we both hold onto each other tightly.

Chapter Fourteen

Ben Wake

Out at the cabin, I find myself missing my warm days more and more. I was born and raised in upstate New York, up in the mountains. The Adirondacks are not as grand as the Rockies when seen from a distance, but up close both places are very similar. In the woods you can walk all day and not find as much as ten square feet of level ground. The trees are tough old things. Only the strong ones thrive on the thin soil of the slopes, the brutal, bitter cold winters.

Walking through the woods in the early morning was always one of my most precious simple joys in those days. The sunlight in the morning was brighter in some ways than at sunset. It always felt fresher, more filled with hope and promise. I miss looking forward to the dawn, to greeting the light, always optimistic that I was standing on the cusp of a good day. I can bundle up and wear dark glasses to go out and watch the first rays of light break over the mountains, but it’s not the same as feeling it on my skin.

I don’t know whether taking that joy vicariously through Ivy makes it any better or worse for me. A little bit of both, perhaps. I miss it in a very visceral way every time I see her eyes light up and she throws her head back and smiles. It is hard to not be happy when she is happy. It’s like her mood infects me, colors how I see everything around me. I know that the last day has been hard on her, having been completely uprooted and taken

on the run, but the simple fact that she can step out of the cabin into the light and smile because it's a beautiful world and she is alive reminds me of just how wonderful and pure her spirit is.

I sit down next to her and put my hand on her shoulder. She leans her head over so her cheek rests on my fingers. She doesn't say anything, but I can see by the set of her shoulders that she still has a thousand questions for me. We didn't talk much yesterday. I showed her around the cabin, let her know where all of the supplies were, our escape routes if we needed to make a desperate run for it. She took her time familiarizing herself with everything. At one point, she asked, "Do you ever eat real food?"

When I told her I didn't, she took that as permission to completely rearrange the kitchen to her liking. "Since I'll be the only one using, it…" she said. "Why do you even have all this stuff you're never going to use," she asked, as she moved all of the pots and pans to a different cabinet.

"To make the place look normal," I said. "To keep up my cover as a mortal, in case I ever had to have somebody out here."

She looked at me, studying my face for a while.

"Not because you were expecting to have to run out here with me?" she asked. "I mean, you've actually got a decent setup here. This is a functional kitchen and you've got enough staples laid up that I could actually survive here without setting foot outside for weeks. This doesn't look like something you just threw together for show."

"Not for you, specifically. I set this up well before I fell in love with you," I told her. "Well before the thought that you and I would ever need to go on the run together."

"But you were prepared to go one the run with a regular human?"

"I've lived among you for a long time. Even before I was hiding out from my clan, there were times when it was best for me to just live out with

you, look like one of you, act like one of you. I do form connections with you, and sometimes, things happen and I have to go into hiding with one of you."

Ivy finished stacking the pots, and went for the utensil drawers. She didn't speak for a long time. When she finally did, she carefully shut the drawers and turned to face me. "I'm not the first girl you've seduced and taken out to the woods, am I?"

"Actually, you are," I said. "What I told you on the night we first kissed, that I spend more time with places than people now, which was the truth. It has been a very, very long time since I've opened myself up to somebody the way I have with you."

"How long?" she asks.

"Your grandmother was probably a young woman."

"My grandmother was never a young woman. She was born an old curmudgeon." Just a hint of a smile broke across Ivy's face when she said that.

"Like I said. It's been a very long time since I've let myself know love."

She still looked uncertain.

"The last time I had to go on the run with somebody was about eight years ago. He had something the Negre desperately wanted, and was in an extremely precarious position — literally minutes from being caught when I found him. I saved his life by having a hideout stocked just like this where I could take him and lay low for a few weeks."

"Was he kind of like me?" Ivy asked. "There was something special about him your clan wanted?"

"No. He got himself caught up in the Great War. He had information."

"Great War?" Ivy asked.

I opened my mouth to say something.

“No,” she said. “Let me try to take in what you’ve told me already. There’s only so much I can handle in one day.”

That was yesterday. Sitting on the front porch of the cabin with her now, her cheek still resting on my hand, I don’t want to ask her yet if she’s ready to hear about the Great War. It’s not a pleasant tale, and she looks so content right now.

Ivy looks at me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” I tell her.

“Do you know how to make coffee? I mean, I do. I make it for myself all the time, but when Grandma’s home, she always makes it for us in the morning. It makes me feel safe, like I’m in the right place and everything is fine in the world to have it ready and waiting for me in the morning. If I weren’t here with you, right now, I’d be home in bed smelling it brewing downstairs.” She reaches a hand up and wipes a tear from her eye.

“I don’t have fresh milk or creamer,” I tell her.

“I know,” she says. Of course, she does. She knows everything in the kitchen and pantry.

“When I sneak into town this evening to see if the hunter is still there, I’ll get some.”

“How do you know I take my coffee with milk?” she asks.

“When I brought you breakfast yesterday morning that was the first thing you did.”

“It seems so long ago,” she says.

“It does,” I agree.

“Even for you, who’s lived so long and done this before?”

“Even for me,” I say. “In just a few days we’ve gone from new friends, to a couple, to lovers, to hiding out together. We’ve crammed an awful lot

of living into that time."

"You still haven't answered my question," Ivy says. I look at her, wondering what I've missed. "Do you know how to make coffee?"

"Yes," I say, kissing her cheek as I get up. Not only do I make her coffee, but I break into some of the other foodstuffs to make her a simple breakfast to go with it.

My relationship with food varies a lot. I will actually become violently ill if I ingest anything other than living blood. In fact, even a small amount of blood from a dead creature can kill me. Most of the time, the scent of food and drink is very off-putting to me because of that. It is another reminder of what I'd lost when Sonia Vătafu turned me, another simple pleasure that will forevermore be denied to me.

But when I choose to prepare food for someone else, if it is done from a place of caring, it strikes me very differently. There is a selflessness to creating something that is dangerous to me but nourishing for someone that I care about. I don't know if Ivy will ever understand the depths of emotion that are opened up in me by breaking the seal on a can of coffee, filling the air with its rich, nutty scent.

When she'd asked me just a few minutes ago to make her coffee, because it would help her feel safe and cared for and like the world was right, I couldn't think of how sick it would make me to drink it. Instead, I realize that it is a gift like very few others I could ever give. I give her something that benefits only her and not me. The mug of warm liquid I pour out and hand to her is something we will never be able to share, and that makes it all the more beautiful to me.

I sit next to her while she eats her breakfast on the cabin steps, despite the fact that I desperately want to get inside and out of the morning sun that is shining directly on us. It seems so comforting for her, though.

“Where’s your car?” she suddenly asks me.

“Stolen for a joyride last night, and abandoned miles from here. I don’t even know where it ended up.”

“How?”

“While you were sleeping, I went out, and found some dumb kids looking for trouble. I just nudged them a little bit toward some trouble that would be useful to us.”

“What if we need to go somewhere?” Ivy asks me.

“Remember our escape routes,” I say. “If we take the downhill route, we’ll hit a highway in just under two miles. If we go uphill, it’s a little more than one mile until we hit a road with real traffic. Later this afternoon, I’ll take you to the roads to show you what to do from there if you have to run without me.”

“What are the chances of that happening?”

“At night, it’s not very likely. If the sun is out, the odds of us getting separated are greater. I’ll be less able to defend you, so you might need to go on without me.”

Ivy looks at me, seeing me squinting against the bright light. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she says, and starts getting up. I put my hand on her arm to stop her. “I can tolerate it until you’re done with breakfast. Please.”

“I just didn’t notice how uncomfortable you are until you mentioned it,” Ivy says, looking down.

We spend the rest of the morning inside. I give Ivy a more thorough tour of the inside of the cabin and where everything is. In every room, underneath a window, there’s a false panel in the wall that conceals a short rifle loaded with silver bullets – valuable for defense against both vampires and thropes. I am relieved the first time I show one to Ivy that she is not immediately afraid of it. Her grandmother keeps guns in the house for

hunting, and made sure to teach her from a young age how to respect and handle them. The two women even go out hunting together a few times a year. It is good that she knows how to fire a rifle, but I hope it never comes down to that. Hunting is different than shooting at something that looks human, or that is barreling down on you, teeth out, and howling. I had come back from France pretty jaded about killing, but still, the first time I had a mad thrope charge me, I was more scared than the first time I saw a German tank come over a trench. Machines have nothing on that howl or the look thropes get in their eyes. At least Ivy won't have to worry about a thrope. Just Negre hunters.

In the afternoon, when the mountains above us start to shade us from the sun, I take Ivy out again. I show her again the three best routes away from the cabin that I'd identified going downhill. They run alongside small rises in the land, or large downed trees, to help keep out of sight. "We vampires can see extremely well at night – even better than you can see in daylight," I tell her. "If we run into trouble, our best first option is to wait it out in the cabin until morning when they're weakest. If we can't, we do our best to stay hidden as we run to the road."

I take her down one of the escape routes. Before we get close enough to be seen from the highway, I stop. I point out a tree stump near the road with a white boulder on either side of it.

"Right at the base of the stump is a loop of rope, nearly invisible unless you know it's there. Pull up on the rope if you're being chased," I tell Ivy. "It's the lid to a sealed chest. Inside, you'll find flares and a pistol loaded with silver bullets. First thing, crack a flare – there's a bright red pull cord, just yank it and drop the thing, preferably on the road. They're magnesium so they burn bright white. Even in full daylight, it will hurt your eyes to look at it. There are some other compounds in them, too, that mimic the

qualities of sunlight to some degree. It won't weaken a vampire as much as actual daylight will, but it will help even things out a little bit, especially at night."

"Then take the pistol and shoot at anything that moves?"

"The pistol is your last resort. Try to flag down a car while burning flares if you can. Get yourself away."

Ivy looks around. At this time in the afternoon, there is a steady stream of traffic on this highway. Even at night, there is usually at least one car every few minutes on the road. It makes me nervous to be out by the road in full daylight.

"What are the chances it will come to that?" Ivy asks.

"Low," I say.

Ivy gives me that look again, where she's clearly trying to figure out if I'm lying to her.

"One of the problems with immortality, is that without the specter of death always hovering over your shoulder, you are very slow to change, and to learn, and to grow. You forget to adapt. It's why I don't always fit in easily when I try to blend with you. In many ways, I still look at the world the way I did a hundred years ago, I act as if people will respond the way they did, as if an action on my part will lead to the same reaction."

"What does this have to do with whether or not I'm going to get into a gunfight on the highway?"

"Come with me," I tell her, offering my hand. She takes it, and we start walking back up toward the cabin. "I was one of the best hunters. There is nothing any other hunter knows about finding a vampire that I don't. I actually taught the one that was looking for your house yesterday. She's hunting alone. When she discovers that you have fled, she's going to assume I've most likely taken you far away from here. She will contact

other hunters try to figure out where we're running to, instead of searching this area in depth."

"Is that why you had me tell Grandma to get out of town for a few days?"

"Yes. They might think we're with her and send somebody out to check."

"You had me tell her 'Negre hunters', as if that would mean something to her."

"I don't know exactly what or how much your grandmother knows about us," I tell Ivy.

"She knows about a lot more than you might suspect, Ben."

"I have figured that out. She knew the instant that we met that I was a vampire, though. If she could tell that, she probably knows about the bigger clans, at least. Anybody that knows that much knows about the Negre."

"I guess that explains why she didn't want me to have anything to do with you," Ivy says.

"Yes. Relationships like ours are not easy. Her concerns are very well founded," I have to admit to Ivy. "It's a good thing she didn't manage to push us apart, though. I guess we're both lucky that you got stubborn with her."

"I guess so," Ivy says.

As we go up the slope, I see her examining the escape route we're walking. She's a very smart woman, very perceptive. I'm sure she's figured out that I come out here occasionally and trim back some of the branches that cross the path, that I've cleared any stones or roots that could trip a person or turn an ankle. Her eyes constantly dart left and right, seeing what she can see, what would be able to see her.

"Is she in any danger?" Ivy asks.

“No. If they approach her, they’ll compel her to speak. They won’t need to torture her for information or otherwise harm her. It would just waste their time and not get them any closer to finding us.”

“Wouldn’t they try to use her to draw us out?”

“They would need a way to communicate to us that they have her,” I say. “For that, they’d need to find us, or she’d need to have a way of communicating with us. Neither of us has phones now.”

Ivy slowly nods her head.

“If I thought she would come to harm, I would have brought her with as well. I know that it would destroy you to lose her.”

“Thank you,” Ivy says, quietly. “I suppose this means that I can’t get any messages out to her, though, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” I say. “For now. When things cool down, we can get a message to her without giving ourselves away.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ivy Sparks

By the end of the second day at Ben's cabin, I start to relax a little bit. Everything seems very well set up and prepared. If it is indeed true that he is as old as he says he is, I can trust in his experience to carry us through safely. Plus, I have a little more to me than he suspects yet, my secret that I have told nobody. In a way, that makes it easier for me to accept that he'd been hiding his true nature from me as long as he has. I have been deceiving him for just as long, and am still holding it from him. Grandma made sure to teach me about protection from vampires and werewolves as part of my lessons. There is obviously more that she hadn't given me, like this bit about clans and hunters and some War that had happened. But I have some tools to keep me safe, especially now that I know what I'm dealing with. On the other hand, I can't help but wonder why I never picked up that Ben is a vampire. Looking back on it, all of the signs were there. I guess knowing that vampires exist in the world is one thing. Finding they are walking the hallways of your school is something else entirely.

It is such a beautiful evening that I take my dinner out to the front porch to eat it. Since the sun is behind the mountains behind us, Ben is able to join me without discomfort. He leaves his hat, jacket, and dark glasses inside while he sits out with me, wearing just a pair of dark jeans and a t-

shirt. It is really weird to see him dressed down so much, because I'd gotten used to him always dressing nicely, if a bit oddly, at school.

"I will be up all night," he tells me. "Tomorrow, I will need to get some sleep during the day, but I will wait until you wake up."

"How much sleep do you need?" I ask him.

"Honestly, just a few hours every other day or so, as long as I can avoid sunlight. If you will stand watch during the height of the day, which is when any other vampires are at their weakest, I can be up and active the rest of the time."

The entire cabin has heavy blackout curtains on all of the windows. I also noticed that one of the two twin beds in the small bedroom has an extra curtain around it. I slept alone last night, while Ben was out. All day, I have found myself wondering if it would be possible to push the two beds together so I could sleep with him, but it sounds like he won't be sleeping at the same times I am.

I don't know yet whether that is a curse or a blessing. I certainly still desire him, a lot. If anything the danger and the way he is taking such good care of me has really heightened my feelings for him, not only emotionally, but physically. Him sitting next to me with his powerful arms bare is certainly doing something for me right now.

At the same time, the danger and all of the stress and uncertainty have also left me conflicted about him. I feel that if he had never laid eyes on me, I would be having a perfectly normal day right now. I'd be sitting at home, doing my piano practice while Carl and Grandma pretend they're not both drinking beer in the kitchen. I'd still have Carl in my life. The loss of my dearest and closest friend, really because of a fight about Ben, also leaves me a little cold toward him in my heart. Taken together, my feelings for him, bright hot and cold, leave me just warm for him.

It is at this moment that I remember a couple of other faces, of young men that I had not previously thought of in any sort of romantic way. Now, though… Now that I know what it is like to touch a man, feel him, have him touch me, kiss me, enter me… I've felt that before, I must have just not wanted to admit it…

I shake my head to clear those thoughts out. This is not how I thought I'd feel just a day after my first time with a guy, especially with a guy I went to full of love and true desire. I should be still floating through the air, wiggling and feeling a tiny ache inside of me every time I think of his body and his touch.

I finish my dinner and go inside to clean up. "No," Ben says. "I'll be up all night. I can take care of it." Doing dishes has never been my favorite chore, so that's about all the argument he needs to make. Besides, there's no running water to the cabin. To do dishes, I'd have to heat up two basins full of water on the propane burner, one to wash, and one to rinse. That's a lot more work than simply running the sink would be.

One thing I must say is that Ben was kind enough to stock the cabin with a good selection of books. We sit down and read, side by side in a couple of camp chairs while the sun goes down outside. He recommended 'All Quiet on the Western Front' to me, as one of the books that could best explain what life was like for the men he fought in France back in 1918. He still hasn't told me much about what it was really like in the war for him, but it seems very important to him that I understand what it was like for the soldiers on the other side. I can't help but think it is his way of dealing with his guilt over what he'd done then, to make sure I know their story and that I remember them as actual living, breathing, loving people that got caught up in something much greater than themselves.

As the light outside fades, Ben closes all of the curtains in the cabin. There are two small lamps in the cabin, on little charging stations connected to solar panels on the roof. He hands me one and the first thing I do is shine it at him playfully. He smiles at me, but I can tell he's confused.

"This was charged by sunlight," I tell him, laughing a little bit. "So, I was wondering if it would repel you the same way."

"No," he says. "It's only the direct sun that weakens me. The LEDs don't have whatever it takes."

I can tell he's trying to get the joke. "Come on, Ben," I say. "I know you wouldn't have these lights inside the cabin if they would actually harm you."

At that, some sign that I actually thought through what I was doing, I see him relax and enjoy my little bit of fun. When I get tired enough to sleep, I ask Ben if he will at least come to bed with me and hold me until I fall asleep.

"Of course," he says. As he follows me to the bedroom, I think he understands what I am asking for.

The twin bed would be tragically too small for two in hot weather, but with a little chill in the air, I look forward to having his body up against mine under the covers. I strip down to my underwear, taking a quick glance at his face as I crawl into the bed. He doesn't show any obvious disappointment that I don't' undress completely. He takes just his jeans off and joins me.

"Listen, my love," Ben tells me. "I really hoped to be able to tell you the full truth about myself before we spent the night together. I wanted you to be able to choose to be with me, a vampire, completely of your own free will even knowing what I am. I will never forgive myself for withholding that information from you before I made love to you, and I've vowed to

myself I will never, ever lie to you again. I make that vow to you, now, as well."

"I want to believe you, Ben," I say.

"That's why I had initially wanted it to be prom night. It would have given me time to make sure you knew everything about me before we took that step together. The hunter closing in on you forced my hand."

I roll over to face him. We did not bring a light into the bedroom, so it is almost completely dark in the room. Dark enough that I can barely make out a fuzzy silhouette of him. "Forced you to take my virginity?"

"Yes," he says.

I'm suddenly furious at him, and am about to tear into him when he puts a finger to my lips.

"Give me just a minute to explain, please?"

"Make it good," I say. Even though I have my own secrets, I would never claim that being a witch would force me to do anything with him.

"The moment I consummated our union, that I climaxed inside of you, I claimed you as mine. I placed a protection on you, a bond so strong that even the worst of us cannot violate it even if he wanted to. No other vampire may directly harm you now. No other vampire can feed on you or turn you. They cannot even physically touch you without my permission. What we did in that hotel room the other night was more than just me showing you in the purest way that I could how much I love and adore you. It will help keep you safe. As long as I am alive, no other vampire can harm your body, and I will not allow any to touch you."

"Why am I hiding out with you then?" I ask Ben.

"Because I could not bear to be without you. To be separate from you while I hide away would drain all joy from my nights, would darken all of

the stars in the sky. And there are ways to harm you that don't require anyone to touch you."

I can understand both of those reasons, especially the second. Grandma made sure I understood that our magic has rules, but there are ways to skirt around rules, or even to use rules that protect to constrain instead. I shiver a little bit. Ben takes the opportunity to pull me closer to him. I let him do so. "Are we going to be alright, Ben?" I ask.

"I told you, I was one of the best hunters. I'll keep you safe."

I can't deny the confidence in his voice as he tells me that. I know that he knows it is true. That is what I'll have to rely on. I let myself soften up a little more against his body.

I hear him open his mouth as if to speak several times. Finally, I say, "Spit it out, already."

"Ok," he says. "I promised to be truthful with you from here on. Something that you need to know."

"Yes?"

"It was Carl that really saved your life."

"How?" I ask.

"When he heard that I'd asked you to prom, he was furious. He came to me and we had some words. In the course of the conversation, I realized that he'd been near a vampire just a couple hours earlier. That's when I knew that we couldn't wait until prom."

"Carl…" My dear, good Carl, who isn't keeping secrets from me.

"Yes. He is a very good man, Ivy. I hope that once we are safely through this, perhaps we he and I can make a fresh start with each other."

"Will we get safely through this," I ask Ben.

He puts one of his hands on my chest, over my heart. Even though I can't see him, I can tell he's concentrating very hard on something. I

wonder what, exactly.

“In most of the futures I can imagine, you are unharmed,” he says, finally.

“But not all of them?”

“The future is never certain. But I know what I’m doing, and you are bright and observant and careful. I think we’ll get through this together.”

I curl in closer to Ben. I try to hide my disappointment as he spoons against my back that he is not very warm. I think now of Nathan, who is always warm. Even hot to the touch a little, as if he’s constantly running a fever. I try to bring myself back to Ben, back to the man I am with now, to the choice I’d made. “You certainly weren’t this cold two nights ago,” I say, because my thoughts of Nathan bring it so sharply to my mind just how little warmth I’m getting from Ben’s body. “I remember feeling the fire inside of you everywhere you touched me.” I take a breath, then ask, “Have you lost your desire for me?”

“No!” Ben says. “Not at all. Tonight, it just seems you’re not in the mood.”

“I don’t mean that,” I say. “Your lack of body heat. Do you I no longer light the fire in you?”

“Oh, Ivy,” he says. “You do now even more than you did before I first touched you. I am just very rarely warm. That’s what we call you, but the way. We call non-vampires ‘warm’, because you always are. We are almost always cold.”

“What was different about the other night? Was it lust or something?” I ask.

“I fed before I picked you up, so I would have some body heat.”

That seriously unsettles me. The thought that just a couple of hours before kissing my neck, he was biting somebody else’s, taking blood from

them. This feels like such a huge betrayal! A few minutes ago, I was certain he loved me, but now I find I can't help but recoil from his touch, my whole body stiffening. It is only after I've pulled away that I realize that I am in a cabin, alone in the woods with him. I'm the only one he'll be able to feed on now.

"You're going to turn me into a vampire out here, aren't you?"

"No," he says. "I would never do that to you, even if you asked me."

"But, when you take my blood?"

"I won't."

"I'm the only person out here, Ben! Or are you going to grab a snack or something whenever you sneak into town?" I ask.

"No," Ben says. "I don't take from humans anymore. I haven't for a few years now. Just animals."

The image of him embracing another person right before coming to me fades, to be replaced by a mental image of him chasing down a raccoon or something in the woods. The absurdity of that new image calms me a little bit, but can't quite let myself draw close to him again.

"I have to eat just like you do," he says. "It's no different, and I'll do it where you can't see it."

"It's just hard for me to imagine," I say.

Ben laughs.

"What?" I ask.

"You're taking longer to get over the fact that I drink animal blood instead of human than the fact that I'm more than a hundred years old and have been involved in some war or another for most of that time."

"I've been hunting. I know what it's like to see an animal bleed, and I have never looked at that and thought about taking a big drink. That's as

quick that I know. I can't even begin to figure out how to deal with the rest, so I'm setting it aside until I can work out how to process it."

"Fair enough," Ben says. He shifts a bit on the bed and opens his arms to invite me to come closer again.

I slowly accept his offer. "What did you mean when you told me you wouldn't turn me even if I asked?"

"Life as a vampire is not pleasant. I have gotten many more years than I would have otherwise, but very, very few of them have been happy."

"But you keep going on?" I ask.

"I keep going on. None of them have been so terrible that I've felt ending it all would be better. But there's really been no hope in me that things will turn around, that someday I'll find out how to be happy as a vampire. It's a strange place to be, neither content nor truly unhappy. Just sitting in some dim and dreary place between," Ben says.

He runs a finger through my hair. "Even after having found love, real and genuine love, for the first time, I can't even keep you warm at night. I can't walk in the sun with you. I can't sit back and enjoy a fine meal with you. There are so many things I will never be able to give you."

"If I ever develop a taste for your diet, we could dine together," I say.

My little joke seems to put him at ease for a bit.

"Maybe tomorrow, before bed you could go out and hunt?" I ask. "Just enough to make a little bit of heat."

"I can do that," Ben says.

"There is one thing you could do for me that no warm man will ever be able to," I tell him.

"What's that?"

"Since you can read in darkness, go to the living room and get a book of poetry, and read some to me while I fall asleep."

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Morning finds me waking to the scent of coffee, and Ben's footsteps inside the cabin. It's not the same as Grandma treading on that one squeaky step on the way upstairs, but there seems to be one board somewhere in the kitchen that has a little bit of a creak to it.

I crawl out from under the covers, and find my clothes neatly folded on a small side table in the bedroom. I pick up just a tiny scent of fresh soap on them, and they have that little bit of stiffness of clothes that have been dried on a line.

"Can you write down your clothing sizes for me?" Ben asks, when I get to the kitchen. "I don't want to go near your house tonight, and quite frankly, I'd feel really weird going through your closets and drawers anyways, so I'll go into Grantham tomorrow night to do some shopping."

"And here I was hoping that the first time a guy bought me underwear it would be something really sexy he'd like to see me in."

"Don't tempt me," Ben says. "There is one of those adult stores not far from here."

"Not very practical for living out here, though."

"The kinds of underthings sold at such stores aren't practical for anything," Ben says, setting breakfast in front of me. "But people buy them anyways."

"Stick with practical for now, please," I say. I see a little bit of disappointment in his eyes at that, but he seems to accept it.

I finish up my breakfast, and this time insist on helping him do the dishes. I want to be able to take care of things whenever he's away from the cabin. I'm also getting a little stir crazy already, with just books and conversation for entertainment. I'm missing my piano terribly, and am starting to worry about my friends. I always talk to Kate and Nathan several

times a day, I used to with Carl, too. They have certainly figured out something is wrong by now. I'd be very surprised if they hadn't been by the house already to check on me when I hadn't responded to any texts, emails, or calls for two full days now. I can only trust that Grandma knew enough from my message I'd sent to reassure them that I was Ok.

She's probably beside herself with worry, too. All she knows is that I'm on the run with Ben, apparently for my own safety, and nothing more.

I am starting to feel very cramped in the cabin, so I decide to go out and walk around the woods.

Chapter Sixteen

Nathan Marsh

It has been two days since Ben and Ivy ran off, and I have completely lost track of them. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If Ben managed to get the two of them hidden well enough neither Emily nor I know where they are, hopefully the hunter is off their scent as well.

On the subject of the hunter, since I presume Ben and Ivy are safe, I want to make sure they stay that way. I have spent a good amount of time driving around keeping my eyes open for her motorcycle, and have even asked a few enthusiasts I know if they have seen it around town lately, to no avail. None of the hotels in the area have had a guest matching her description.

The next best course of action is to go back to her home. Another fast, lights-out trip up to Pangbourne, Wyoming in the small hours of the night. I find the hunter's house easily, just after midnight. There is a small amount of heat coming from a few plugged-in appliances. There is a computer inside that seems to be actively running, but I can detect no sign of the vampire at all. Feeling confident that she is nowhere around, I completely shed my mortal shell, all the better to move freely and undetected by any mundane and physical devices she has around the house. This also gives me significant advantage in locating her other monitors and countermeasures.

Magic, however, is the one tool they have against my kind, if she were knowledgeable and strong enough to use it effectively against me. Magical barriers can be created to completely deny me access, or to alarm to my presence. Any attempts she has made, or has had others make for her, to keep my kind off of her property are weak and old. The strongest, by far, is a protective circle I can detect down in the basement, probably in the room she sleeps in during the day.

At this point I pause, and ponder. I can go in and search through her home leaving as little trace as possible, do everything I can to leave her no evidence I was ever anywhere near here, see if I can figure out where she has gone and go confront her there.

Or, I can come in like a herd of intoxicated bison, my full and true self bright and powerful. Leave her no doubt at all that her circles have been crossed, her home entered, her secrets revealed. The more power I show, the louder her alarm blares, the more she will understand the danger I represent to her. But would that overdo it? Would that push her to something that would increase the danger for Ivy?

Unlike me, the hunter was once mortal. Perhaps I need a mortal's perspective. I drift back to my car, reassume my mortal form, and dial my phone.

"Any news?" is the first thing Emily asks when she picks up.

"None," I say. I fill her in quickly on my attempts to locate Ben, Ivy, and the hunter since we'd last spoke.

"Before you go any further," Emily says, "Stop looking for Ivy. I need Carl to back off, too. As long as we don't know where the hunter is, it might be using one of us to find them. Ben got a sense that she could use Carl to find them. If they don't already know that you and Ivy are close, they will know soon.

“That is wise advice,” I tell her. “I would like some more. I am at the hunter’s home right now. I see no sign she has been here since the day before Ben and Ivy left. She has a small amount of weak warding and alarm. Do I trigger it all or not? Will it panic her and throw her off her hunt, or will it make her unpredictable and more dangerous?”

“What do you sense?” Emily asks.

“I can get no sense on this count. These paths are all hidden from me.”

“My first instinct is to be silent for now. Leave no trace, but find out what information you can. Alarming her this close to her narrowing in on Ben and Ivy, and with Carl in the mix, would make it undeniable that Ivy is something valuable. It would come to the direct attention of old Mihai Racoviță, and these mountains would be crawling with Negre within a day.”

“Do you suspect they still think they’re just after Ben for now?”

“Until you told me she’d found Carl’s house, I think they did. It’s not going to take long for them to learn that there is a triangle between Ben, Carl, and Ivy, and they’ll need to reconsider everything then. If they get any hint at all that you are involved as well, Papa Racoviță will certainly get personally involved.”

“If it did not put Ivy in the position of being bait, it would be a golden opportunity to take Racoviță. No matter the greater good, though, I would never use Ivy that way.”

“I’d have put wards on her like you wouldn’t believe if I ever thought you would,” Emily says.

“Thank you for the bit of clarity,” I tell her. “And thank you for still not binding me with what you know about Ivy.” When I first met Emily, many years ago, before the birth of her own daughter – Ivy’s mother – she had told me that she had received a prophecy about her yet unborn granddaughter. But as I have mentioned before, never ask a witch what she

sees in the future. It is very hard to simply walk toward the inevitable end without suffering great harm along the way.

“Don’t call me again tonight unless it absolutely can’t wait. Let’s keep our communications to only what is necessary. Find out what you can, and I will get in touch when I have something more to share.”

I bid Emily a good night, and decide to maintain my mortal shape. Now that I have gotten a good sense of her home and its protections, I will be able to work around them easy enough, without accidentally triggering anything targeted at my true nature.

I first take a look into the garage, since I have already been there. Only the motorcycle is gone. The weapons hidden inside the tool cases of the truck and one of the ATVs are still stowed. A shelf holding camping gear shows a few shadows in the dust, where some small items were recently removed. Judging by other items on those shelves – her organization system is strict and impeccable – it looks like a small backpacking tent and a sun proof tarp were among the items she took.

Leaving the garage, I take a moment to defeat the locks on the door to the house. The interior is as uncluttered and orderly as the garage. Since I know what I am looking at, it is clear that the kitchen has been carefully staged, with a couple of dishes out on the counter, coffee maker and teapot, bread box, paper napkins in a dispenser. It looks exactly how the kitchen of a neat freak would look if they slipped a bit and did not put their cereal bowl directly into the dishwasher after breakfast. Even the trash can has things in it, but I notice none of it is perishable. The empty soup can at the top of the bin, carefully rinsed, has an expiration date on it three years in the past.

In the living room, there is a television, hooked to a satellite receiver with a remote control on the coffee table. The computer is the item I am

most interested in. The monitor is switched off, but the LED on the front panel of the tower, and the indicators on the wireless modem, are both active. I realize there is another electronic box beside the modem, also with rapidly blinking LEDs. A little poking about, and digging up my admittedly weak knowledge of modern technology, and I see she is running her own web server. I find myself wishing I could find decent cover to bring one of my classmates up and let him go at it. Then I realize that this is a Negre hunter, and that there are probably layers of security on it that would rival what the governments of many nations are capable of. On the other hand, one thing I have learned during my time in Stokers Mill is to never underestimate this generation of young people.

Unfortunately, the desk with the computer on it is devoid of any paper, or even of a pen. I start searching the house, and despite the fact that I had seen her with a paper map on her motorcycle, there are none inside, no notes anywhere. In my search, I find a bedroom up on the main floor of the small house, as carefully arranged as the living room and kitchen to give an illusion of a normal life. Down in the basement is a laundry area that looks like it does receive actual use. From what I recall of the protections I had seen from outside the house, the most powerful protective circle should be located about five feet beyond a blank cinder block wall, right behind the clothes dryer. However, just to the left of the clothes dryer is a wooden hutch containing laundry detergent and several racks of home canned vegetables and fruit. I wonder exactly how old they are?

It is the process of only a little bit of examination to locate first the hidden hinges behind the hutch, and then the catch on the other side that would release it. I remember my conversation with Emily, about being as careful as possible to leave absolutely no trace. This close to a reasonably proper protective circle, I dare not tap into my nature to see what sorts of

physical protections or indicators may lie behind the secret door. I take a moment to consider, and decide that whatever is behind that door is not so vital yet as to risk revealing myself before Emily has had time to consider the matter further, or set things up so that it will not matter.

Regretfully, I leave the house with no new information, no new insights into this hunter, except that she must keep any information that is important strictly digital, probably stored on a mobile device and accessible while offline, considering how much of the area around Stokers Mill has extremely tenuous connectivity.

At least I have no information that I am dying to tell Emily. She can wait a few days to hear nothing.

The next most productive thing for me to do is to see if anybody has been by Ivy and Emily's home since they both left town. I make my way to their place, yet again indulging in my recent habit of parking far down the road. Since I will not be near the vampire's home and anything she has set up, I drop the mortal body again and go fully into my true self. It takes just a short leap and a handful of wing beats to get me high up into the air, and just a handful of seconds to be over the house. I can pick out the harsh glow of Emily's personal circle and the one she shares with Ivy. Both have powerful permanent protections that are regularly recharged, so they are potent, powerful, and painful for me to even look at. Ivy's circle has a much weaker degree of protection around it. She does not do the kind of work there that would require such firm boundaries. Using the raptor qualities of my eyes, I look for motorcycle tracks on the property, footprints where none should be, any easy and physical evidence that the hunter has been near the house. Finding nothing on that first pass, I shift my perceptions to different qualities, tapping into the memories of the grass, trees, and stones. This gives very little detail, but some loose impressions. When people live

somewhere, they and the land adapt to each other. There is a familiarity that each has for the other that over time leaves very little trace.

Strangers on land look at it all differently, process it differently, react to it differently than people who know that land. The land picks this up and retains a thin patina of that unfamiliarity. If you listen to enough small things, you can find enough of them that tell you the same thing. If I were standing on a spot where a stranger to the land had stood, looking in the same direction, with the senses I am using now, I would know it beyond any shadow of a doubt. To try and survey for such from the air is a less certain and more subtle process. I eventually find Ben's track from where he had picked Ivy up for their first date a few days ago, because I know Ben and I know how he feels when he is around Ivy. From there, I see if I can detect anything like Ben that has been nearby. Now that I know what the leaves and twigs and soil calls Ben, I can listen for parts of it that have seen something like Ben.

I am only partially comforted that I have found no evidence of another vampire. For as little as I rely on this sense, I cannot guarantee that it is the absence of a vampire as much as it is my inability to detect one from a distance.

I look to the sky, and realize that if I leave right now, I will be back home in time to sneak back into my room again before anybody knows I spent the night away. But with Ivy's safety at stake, I decide it is better to bear the trouble I will get with my family than to be the good little foster son. Kate will have to pointedly eat my breakfast in the direction of my empty seat at the table this morning instead of having her own hot and waiting for her.

I land as close to the shared circle as I dare get to its protective barrier, and mentally go over the layout of the property. The hunter has very

definite skills on riding her motorcycle off road, but most of the ridgeline would be completely inaccessible to her. Only the top tier riders on bikes so specialized they are completely impractical for the road would be able to approach up the ridge from the highway below. She may have opted to drive past the house on the road as she did when she was sniffing out Carl, maybe stopping near it to feign a break or a check of directions so she could scout the place a little bit more. That would be pretty much impossible for me to detect under any circumstances. Road traffic blends into itself so anonymously so quickly.

Behind the house, the mountain continues to climb. There are a few dirt roads up there certainly accessible to the hunter's vehicle. They also have the advantage of being high ground to watch from, and a good area around the house is cleared of trees. If I wanted to see if there were anything interesting at Emily and Ivy's home, that is exactly where I would set up.

However, Emily and I have had this discussion as well. She keeps game cameras up there along the trails, and a few other kinds of surprises. On the other hand, I am looking for evidence of a very skilled hunter. It is best for me to assume that she would assume any ideal vantage point is itself watched. As I let myself float up one of the trails, I keep a careful eye out for any recent disturbances, and also let myself listen to the memories of the land. That is when I realize it may not have been such a big mistake to approach the hunter the other day while she fixed her motorcycle tire. Yes, she has now seen my face and car, but I also have a sense of her. A sense that lets me pick up the echoes of her passage along the trail, even though she was extremely fastidious about leaving no physical trace.

I follow those echoes, and find where she had stopped to look down on the house. I can sense a pair of optical and infrared binoculars, and

frustration. From that, I can guess that she did not find the house until both Ivy and Emily had left town, and the hunter has not been back since.

Chapter Seventeen

Carl Wilson

My phone rings. It’s Grandma.

“Carl,” she says, sounding rushed. “Can you get out of town without being followed?”

“You know I can.”

“Good. Three o’clock at the Hurley’s off the interstate.”

I check the time. It’s after noon, and a good two-hour drive. “I’ll be there,” I say.

“You catch any sign you’re being followed, make a big loop back home instead. If I don’t see you at three, I’ll assume that’s what happened.”

I don’t waste any time getting on the road, because I’m not planning on taking a very direct route. I keep an eye on my mirrors as I make sudden turns off the highway onto long, empty roads, and once even make a U-turn. Anybody trailing me would need to be really good to keep on my tail without me noticing them back there. I still manage to pull into the truck stop about ten minutes before three, and go into the restaurant.

Grandma gets there five minutes later, and we grab a booth in the corner. We keep the conversation light until the server takes our order, then she leans across the table. “There’s at least one Negre in Stoker’s Mill,” she says.

“Two, kind of. I’ve figured out that Ben is renegade from them.” I tell her about what happened yesterday, when I caught the scent of one zombie that had been sniffing around my car while I checked out Ben’s place, and then my conversation with Ben a little bit later, where he told me I was both in danger myself, and a possible risk to Ivy.

“I didn’t know that Ben was former Negre,” Grandma says. “Doesn’t seem the type. But I know they’re after Ivy.” She tells me to keep calm and collected. All that fuss makes it clear what she wants to tell me next. I know that Ben had his eyes on Ivy, so I’m not happy, but also not surprised to hear that she snuck out last night and had spent the night with him. What I am not expecting is to hear that shortly after she’d gotten home this morning, she and Grandma had gotten into a fight, and she snuck out of the house again a few minutes later. Then there was a call, just telling her to get out of town for a few days because of something to do with the Negre.

“Did she at least look…” I struggle to figure out the right way to ask what I want to ask.

“You know he couldn’t have taken her against her will,” Grandma says.

“He could have certainly nudged it quite a bit, though.”

“I’ve been keeping a very careful eye on that. Everything I could tell was that it was something she genuinely wanted.”

I take a drink of coffee after hearing that. Now that she has truly fallen in love with another, any future she and I have as a couple has ceased to exist. I had been prepared for it since our fight the other day, but it still hurts to know she has given herself completely over to Ben.

“I know it’s hard for you to hear, Carl, but I think it’s better you know now.”

I nod my head.

“I need you to do some things, Carl. You’re not going to like them, but they are very important for Ivy’s survival.”

“Yeah,” I say, distracted by a sudden and intense sense of loneliness.

“Don’t go looking for her. If Ben has sensed that the Negre will get to you through her, you need to stay far away. You understand?”

“I do.” I don’t completely trust that Ben was telling me the truth about his sense, but Grandma is willing to believe it. That’s enough for me.

“You also need to stay away from the house for a few days. You’ll need to run some interference with her friends. People need to believe that she and Ben have run off somewhere. You’ll need to lie to them and get them to believe that you think everything is alright.”

“Is everything alright?” I ask.

“No. If the Negre are looking for her, the worst I’ve feared for her has come to pass. They want something from her, and we need to get them hunting for her anywhere but around here.”

“Are you saying they’re close?”

Grandma gives me a real hard look, as if she’s about to knock me right out of the booth. “Don’t go hunting for them,” she says. “You go on their trail, the Negre will find them. Tell me you understand this, Carl.”

I can’t answer that right away. Even though she’s willing to cut Ben some slack now, I won’t. I still cannot stand the thought of that dead thing touching Ivy, of the risk he’s exposed her to by coming to Stokers Mill and seducing her.

“Tell me you understand me, Carl,” Grandma says again.

“I understand,” I say. But I don’t like it.

“Good,” she says, just as the server brings our food.

*****

It is about eight at night when I get the first call. It’s Kate.

“Hey, Carl,” she says. Carl, not Graylock. She’s worried.

“Hello.”

“I know you might be the last person who’d know, but is there any chance that you’ve heard anything from Ivy? We were supposed to study last night, but she never showed, and we haven’t heard from her all day. Theresa went by her house to drop something off, and said that she and her grandmother were both gone. Is everything alright?”

It hurts me to lie to Kate, but I say, “I have no idea. She hasn’t told me anything. Was Grandma’s truck still at the house?”

“I think Theresa said both the truck and Ivy’s car were both there.”

“She’s probably off with Grandma for something, then. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“It’s not like her to blow Nathan and me off, Carl, and to just vanish for a full day without saying anything to us.”

“Well, you know she’s not talking to me,” I say, reminding her that I told her how Ivy had thrown me out of her life. “So I can’t tell you where she is.”

“I know,” Kate says. “But you’re still close to her grandmother, right? If something really important came up, she’d tell you, wouldn’t she?”

“Probably,” I say. “I haven’t heard anything from her, though. If they’re both going to be away for long, she should give me a call to check in on the house while they’re gone.”

“Please tell me if you hear anything, Ok?” Kate asks.

“I will.”

*****

It’s such a beautiful morning that I don’t even glance toward my car as I leave the house. I take my time walking down the valley to school,

carefully picking my way around a few slippery spots from some rain that fell yesterday.

Kate and Nathan are sitting out in their usual place on the front steps.

“Sit,” Kate says, patting a spot next to her. As I sit down next to her, I notice her giving me a little smile.

“You heard anything?” Nathan asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Grandma called me this morning, said she heard from Ivy last night.”

“Oh my God!” Kate says. “Where is she?”

“Apparently, she and Ben got stupid and decided to run off to Denver over the weekend and are just hanging out there.”

“How stupid?” Kate asks. I can tell by the look on her face she’s asking the question I don’t want to answer.

“I highly doubt she’s shared those kinds of details with her grandma. She did say Ivy at least sounds like she’s doing well, seems happy,” I say.

“Oh… That’s what you meant by getting stupid,” Kate says to Nathan. “I can’t believe she’s doing that with Ben.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I say. I really hope they’ll change the subject soon.

“It’s a pretty safe bet,” Kate says.

“Do you want to run off with Steve, now that you two are…” Nathan asks her.

“Steve’s not really happening anymore,” Kate says.

This is definitely news to me. He hadn’t said anything at work when I saw him yesterday.

“But if he was?” Nathan asks.

“I don’t know,” Kate says. “If it were good, I’d totally blow off a week of school for it.” She leans just a little bit to the side and bumps me with her

shoulder. She looks at me, and suddenly I see the playful tease leave her face. “I’m sorry, Carl.”

I try to shrug it off as no big deal, but neither of them is buying. We sit in awkward silence for a minute, before Kate finally breaks it. “Hey. Tonight, how about the three of us catch a movie? Take our mind off of things.”

“I’d like that,” I say.

The first bell rings, and we all head inside. I swear, all day long every third person asks if I know where Ivy is. Now that I’ve planted the story with Kate and Nathan, I have to swallow my hurt and keep telling people that apparently, she and Ben have thrown all responsibility to the wind and are off on some trip together.

Ever since that day that I got up in his face about freaking Ivy out on the road, people have assumed he and I are arch-rivals, so they struggle to find the right thing to say to me. That is even worse than me having to admit over and over again that they’re together. Despite the bad blood between Ben and I over Ivy, I find myself wrestling with the last conversation he and I had together. When he warned me that I was a danger to Ivy unless I backed way off, I think I also saw some concern for my safety there as well.

One thing that I really must credit Ben for is that he genuinely seems to respect the Truce that ended the Great War, and he’s never approached me with any sort of hostility. Sure, he’s pushed back when I’ve pushed at him, but he’s never started it with me. Whenever I look at him, I see somebody with old eyes that have seen too much. If I can set aside my jealousy that in just a few short months he’s captured Ivy’s heart in a way that I couldn’t over many years, he seems like he’s actually a decent person.

I wonder how we would have gotten along if we'd ever met without Ivy in the middle. For as long as we and the zombies have been at war, we have always shared the burden of our secrets. We all carry the burden of having to keep a huge part of ourselves hidden from people we grow to care about. We all can let our power go to our heads, and use the people around us if we're not careful.

After school, I join Kate and Nathan for a trip over to Grand Lake to catch a movie. Pretty standard action movie, but it was that, a horror flick, or a romcom. They aren't much into scary movies, and a movie where the right boy lands the girl isn't quite the mood we're looking for. Kate sits between Nathan and me. She spends the whole show alternating between leaning right to have a whispered conversation with Nathan, and leaning left, just close enough to touch her shoulder to my arm. Halfway through the movie, I realize that we're playing the armrest game, neither of us quite willing to claim it.

If I weren't so worried about Ivy, I'd put my arm on the armrest, moving into that shared space between us. In the close confines, even above the smell of popcorn and nachos and stale, spilled soda, I can still catch Kate's scent, and she's definitely broadcasting attraction. It's something about the skin around the neck and on the wrists that changes when a woman feels a certain kind of desire. It's no accident that pinkies put perfume precisely on those places.

It's just not the time to pursue that with her. Not while so much of my mind and, honestly, my heart, are still occupied by somebody else. I truly appreciate the way her feelings for me have changed, but it's not anything I can act on right now. Fortunately, I've never lost the first impression the students at Stokers Mill had of me, as somebody awkward and kind of clueless. So as long as Kate doesn't come right out and say it, or plant a kiss

on me, or just start unbuttoning her blouse or anything, I think I can play the ignorant card at her advances until I am in a place where I can let myself think of her that way.

After the film ends and we're walking out to Kate's car, she says, "We're only two hours from downtown Denver. What say we go find Ivy and haul her home?"

"If only we knew exactly where in Denver she is," I say.

"Come on," Kate says. "You could sniff her out, couldn't you?"

"Sorry. We didn't bring any of her clothes or anything for me to bloodhound off of," I say.

Kate and Nathan laugh a little bit at that, but it's forced. I can tell they're still terribly worried. IQ Ivy missing school. Careful, cautious Ivy, who's always guarded her heart, going gaga for some weird guy and literally skipping town with him. Ivy, the most considerate and loyal friend anybody in Stokers Mill has ever known blew off an evening studying with her best friends, and hasn't been in touch at all in the three days since. It is so unlike her.

"Maybe Ben's got some sort of mind control or hypnosis on her," Nathan says, and I notice him watching me curiously.

I don't say anything. I don't know what Nathan's interest in my response is. Even though I must agree with Grandma that I don't think it's likely that Ben has used his zombie charm on her, I say nothing. Too much risk of accidentally saying something that would reveal way too much. Still, the comment gets me taking another look at how Ivy has been lately. If Ben had been using it slowly to seduce her over time, I would have picked up on it. One of the first things you learn as a zombie hunter is how to tell pinkies that have been charmed by them. It's in the eyes, in the voice when they're under the control of a vampire. Grandma also knows a good deal about the

zombies, and she's known Ivy all of her life. If she thought she were under Ben's control, we would be planning on how to find her and get her back – regardless of whether the Negre are after her for something. Grandma wouldn't let her be dominated by a zombie that way. If it were necessary to rescue her from Ben, she'd do it.

I still have this nagging doubt that Ivy is well, though. I'd like to believe that Grandma would never lie to me, but if she were in the kind of danger that put her in the path of a Negre, would Grandma send me off so there'd be no way I could be accused of breaking the Truce. I've been replaying our conversation at the truck stop, how she made me promise not to look for her, lest I cross the path with one of the Negre. I am almost certain that she believes Ben is genuinely acting with Ivy's best interests at heart, and that Ben is also being truthful that the Negre would be able to find her through me. Almost certain that Ben is above board, almost certain that Grandma is being straight with me.

I realize that I need to get away from Kate and Nathan and their speculation about where Ivy is and Ben's motivations. Hearing other people voice the same concerns I have nagging at the back of my mind only makes them louder. I'm almost positive that she's well. The wolf inside does not like 'almost'. The wolf is a being that does not live in shadows and fuzzy gray areas and uncertainty. The wolf wants to know for sure, so it can act, not ponder and speculate and fret. My love for Ivy keeps feeding the wolf's need for certainty. It's becoming harder and harder for me to keep him leashed.

"Look," I say. "We should really get ourselves back home. I don't know about you two, but I've got a big lit test tomorrow that I'm not as prepared for as I'd like to be."

“Yeah,” Kate says. “We were supposed to be studying for our Advanced Chem test with Ivy again tonight.”

“I can’t believe she’s letting that stupid boy make her fail the test,” Kate says.

“Grandma will cover for her,” I say. “She’ll probably tell the school it was a family emergency that came up and she’ll be able to retake it when she gets back.”

“If she gets back,” Nathan says.

“She will,” I say. “She’s too smart to do something permanently stupid.”

“I hope so,” Kate says. “But Graylock is right. We should head back.”

The road back to Stokers Mill is always dark. Going up through the forested mountains, the trees and the steep slopes block out so many of the stars and often even the moon. Not many people have houses there, the ground being too steep to easily build on. The few homes that are there are set back far enough from the road that their porch and yard lights are hidden from view. Sitting in the back seat, without the lights of the dashboard to ruin it, my night vision is strong and I’m letting the wolf out just a little bit, letting him seek out prey in the woods. He sees a few deer cautiously walking parallel to the highway, a couple of owls on the wing silently gliding from the branches to drop on some small rodent or another.

Then it sees something walking on two legs, coming up to the highway from below. I track it as we go past. Kate is smart enough to drive carefully on these twisty roads at night, so I get a good, long look at it as we pass. The wolf has wanted to sink its teeth into Ben for a long time, has studied him through my eyes… I don’t need to see his face. I can tell by the way he’s walking who I’m seeing.

“You Ok, Carl?” Kate asks from the front seat, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?”

“You sound like you’re growling back there,” Nathan says.

I guess I was, but I can’t admit that. “Sorry,” I say. “I must have drifted off. I’ve been told I snore really bad when I sleep sitting up.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ben Wake

Dulce et Decorum Est… One of my favorite poems from my first Great War, the one from 1914 to 1918, penned by Wilfred Owen. The poor man was cut down by the anonymous violence of machine gun fire exactly one week – almost to the hour – before the end of the war while crossing a canal. The title refers to an even older line from the Roman poet Horace, written over two thousand years ago. Owen referred to it as the Old Lie. Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori, “It is sweet and proper to die for the fatherland.”

I finish reading the poem to Ivy, and put the book down. It is our third night in the cabin, and she wants to know more about my past.

“Is that really what it was like for you?”

“Well, poison gas doesn’t affect me. It’s unpleasant, but not deadly. At that time, I was both too scared and confused about what was happening to me, and then intoxicated by my newfound immortality to really understand what the boys around me were going through when we got hit by gas. It wasn’t until years later when I came across this poem that it really hit me how horrible of a weapon gas is. And by that time, I’d seen worse ones used.”

“You’re talking about the other war, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I say. “The other Great War, between the vampire clans and the thropes.”

“Thropes?” Ivy asks.

“It’s short for lycanthropes. Werewolves.”

Ivy frowns at me. “I thought the war was between the clans themselves. And now you’re telling me that werewolves are real too?”

“Oh, we were still at war with ourselves, too. The pressure the thropes put on us made for some grudging cooperation between warring clans, but it never lasted long. In many ways, nobody hates a vampire more than another vampire. It is another unfortunate side-effect of immortality. When you know you’re going to live forever, sometimes you stop caring about the little lives of the people that will die, and you concern yourself only with those you consider your equals. In such a small population, petty disagreements are greatly magnified, and you can literally hold a grudge forever.”

“Is that why you’re on the run from your clan? Somebody has a petty grudge against you?”

“Yes and no,” I say. “I fought hard in the second Great War. I let my clan manipulate me into believing that the thropes were such a threat not only to us, but to all life, that any measures against them were fair. Nothing I could imagine was too cruel, too low, too evil. The simple end of surviving them justified any means. Ironically it was my belief that they were not human that let me believe that. It is something so deeply embedded in the human psyche that even after a hundred years of thinking I was more, that reflex still exists within me. When humans can find a way to dehumanize another person, the line has been crossed, and you will justify or forgive yourself anything. But a thrope is no less human than I am, or you are, really. Some of them are humans that were turned. Some of them

are pups born of two thrope parents. But at their heart, they are still humans. Just humans infected with some disease, just like me."

Ivy takes a drink of water. Since I finished the poem, her posture has closed up, her body language is very guarded in my presence. "I understand," she says. "I read the news and what people post online. We do it all the time, don't we?"

"We do," I say.

She unfolds her posture a little bit, as if that admission that it is a weakness she and I both share makes me a little more approachable again.

"Something obviously happened during that war to finally change you," she says. "What was it?"

I tell her about the Sângele Pierdut – the Lost Bloods – the vampires that would intentionally starve themselves until they went violently feral, and then we'd unleash them on thrope packs. "When we dehumanized the thropes so much that we willingly and consciously rejected our own humanity that much. When I looked into the eyes of one of the Lost and saw that there was almost nothing left, that it barely recognized me as one of its own, and it was just that bare shred of recognition that kept it from ripping my throat out. Realizing that we had decided to fight what we thought was evil by choosing to embrace an even deeper evil. That's when I knew that we had lost our way even more than the Lost Bloods had. They were willing to take themselves to those depths, but we were willing to pretend we were above that while we sent them off to dirty their hands so we could keep ours clean."

"That is truly horrible," Ivy says, visibly shuddering. "Are any still around?"

"No," I say. "For a while, they had turned the tide of the war in our favor. The thropes couldn't stand against them, they couldn't gather in

packs, because all we had to do was release one the Sângele Pierdut on them and they'd disorient the whole pack enough for us to wipe it out. But the thropes learned how to fight in smaller packs, better ways of communicating and coordinating between groups. It got to the point where each Lost Blood brought us fewer pelts. There was less glory in it, so fewer vampires took that route. Some clans, including the Negre, tried to force vampires to become Sângele Pierdut, but it wasn't worth it. The new breed didn't have it in their hearts to go that deeply feral, and the time and effort spent creating one by force, only to have it take one or two pelts at most, was greater than the effort required to just go out and hunt them down the old fashioned way."

"So I don't have to worry about one of them coming after us here?"

"You don't," I say. "It would take a much stronger enemy than just me for a new crop of volunteers to undertake the process."

"Good," she says.

"But the Negre still do consider me a traitor, and they still want you, independent of that, so we need to remain vigilant out here."

"You keep dancing around that traitor bit," Ivy says. "I think it's time you told me what that's all about."

For the first time in a very long time, I find myself wishing that I could consume the food and drink of the warm without becoming horribly sick, because I could use a stiff drink right about now.

I still get up and pace for a moment. I feel so ridiculous for doing so, needing to work off nervous energy like some thrope feeling caged.

I finally settle a bit and sit back down. "There's a Truce now between us and the thropes. It happened about eleven years ago. They had gained the upper hand in the war again, but we all knew it would only be a matter of time before the balance shifted. The clans were starting to unite a little

more, their temporary alliances lasting just a little bit longer. We knew that in another decade or so, we'd push them back, but we also knew that the clans wouldn't be able to cooperate for much longer than that, especially if they started sensing a final victory coming up. If the clans ever get to the point where they feel they're going to wipe out the thropes for good, they're all going to turn on each other to try and gain as much as they can before the external pressure to cooperate is gone. We knew it, the thropes knew it. There were just enough on either side that didn't want to see the tide of the war flow to our favor and then ebb again, leaving us in fifty years or so no closer to a resolution than we were then."

I shift a bit in my seat, not able to get comfortable, and I go on. "Of course, even as we were negotiating the Truce with the thropes, the clans were maneuvering against each other. That external pressure of the war that I mentioned. We all knew that the moment the Truce went into effects all of the old grudges and enmities were going to flare back up. Thing is, I had made genuine connections and friendships with vampires of other clans. There were – are – a lot of us younger vampires that have no use for the old feuds."

Ivy definitely looks at me funny when I describe myself as one of the "younger" vampires.

"Shut up," I say, and she cracks a smile at me.

"If I checked your wallet right now, would I find your AARP card?"

"Funny," I tell her. I'm glad of both the break from the story, and of Ivy looking like she's starting to genuinely relax despite the gravity of what I'm telling her. Maybe she's adapting to the situation, and accepting that things will be a little rough for us for a while. Maybe she knows there's still danger, but that we can pull through together.

“May I continue,” I ask, making a slight bow as if I’m petitioning royalty for some favor.

“Please, do,” she says.

“I’ve told you before that I’m one of the best vampire hunters among the clans. Despite my youth.” I wink at her. “So as the threat from the thropes lessened, I was being pulled back from that front and prepared to start going after my own kind again. By this time, I really had seen way too much killing. Between the human wars I’d been caught up in, the Great War, the clan wars. I can’t say there was a big epiphany moment. I mean, seeing the Lost Bloods was a huge point, but I can’t really identify the exact moment that I swore off war. I can clearly remember the day that I vowed to never again feed on a human, but that moment was not the same as when I made the final decision to turn away from being a soldier for the Negre.”

“That makes me feel a lot safer, being here alone with you,” Ivy says. “The part about not feeding on humans.”

“I know,” I say. “Even if I still were, though, I wouldn’t feed from you unless my life truly depended on it. Some vampires find it very intimate to feed from their warm lovers, but I don’t see it as such. It seems too much like I’d be using you, and not like we were sharing something. It’s all taking on my part, with nothing of equal value that I can return.”

This closes Ivy up a little bit again. “I mean, I think I can see why some might find it meaningful or romantic in a relationship, but I don’t think I could. You kiss like I never imagined anybody could ever kiss. So intense and powerful. I guess I just can’t imagine looking at your mouth and thinking it’s sexy if I’d ever seen my own blood in it, you know?” she asks.

“I do,” I say. I understand exactly what she means by that. When I brush my lips against her neck, the thought of breaking her skin and taking from her seems like it would be such a betrayal of her trust in me, and of

her being as a whole. I get up from the chair at the kitchen table where we'd both been sitting, and go to the small couch in the front room. I pat the cushion next to me and Ivy comes to join me. As she'd requested, I'd gone out to discreetly feed just before I woke her at dawn, so I have some body heat to share with her. She curls up against my chest, and I feel some more of her tension from the last few days melt away.

Once she's settled in, I pick up my account again. "I had proven useful enough as a killer that I was starting to gain status among the Negre. Being a killer is a huge virtue among them, but having any kind of status or influence is dangerous. While the Negre have rival clans, there are also constant rivalries within the clan as well. Mihai Racoviță, our Bunicul în Sânge, the elder of the clan, holds his position by keeping an iron grip on the entire clan. He also encourages us to betray and backstab each other. He wants only the strongest and most cunning to thrive in the clan. I believe that he orchestrates more than half of the rivalries himself, so he always knows who owes who and who has a silent grudge against who. This way, if anybody ever becomes strong enough to threaten his hold, he knows who to nudge which way to take his potential rival out.

"As it became more obvious to some that I had lost the heart for violence and wanted to turn away, they saw a chance to use me in one of their intrigues. Take me down, and everybody holding me up as a hero of the clan and of the Great War would lose face. One night another very old vampire named Ion Georgescu, one of Racovită's top lieutenants here in the United States, went missing. His jewelry was eventually found among some ropes and stakes out on the south face of a hill. He'd been exposed to direct sunlight until it burnt him to nothing. The investigation showed that there were only three vampires that had easy access to get into his home, and of them, I was the only one who'd been nearby at the time. Unfortunately,

while I’m an extremely skilled hunter, I am very bad at court intrigue. I was taken by surprise, literally, when I was seized and hauled off to Romania to answer for his death. I realized way too late that somebody who wanted Georgescu dead had also taken the opportunity to set me up as the one who either killed him, or aided those who had. They were good, really good, because they left it ambiguous as to whether it was me or not. Whoever had taken him down had great skill, but had also faked the kind of mistakes I would be unlikely to make. I felt especially trapped by that. If they had tried to pin me as either the killer or an accomplice, I could have drafted a defense for myself. But not knowing exactly what I was being accused of, I couldn’t figure out how to properly defend myself.”

“That is terrible,” Ivy says, putting a reassuring hand on my knee.

“I was sure that I was going to find myself staked out myself, still alive, on a south-facing hill, to die slowly of sun poisoning and hunger. Vampires are very much into two eyes for an eye, two teeth for a tooth in our sense of justice. If the metaphor makes sense, it was in my brightest hour that I was saved from that fate.”

It takes Ivy a second to understand that a vampire’s darkest hour is actually their time of greatest strength. She nods and taps my knee to tell me she gets what I mean.

“One of my blood brothers, another vampire that had been turned by Sonia Vătafu, came into my cell at high noon on an unusually sunny day for late fall in that part of Romania, and smuggled me away from the old clan castle. We had learned to hunt together, and I consider him one of the few that surpasses my skills. I still only understand half of how he managed to get me off of the castle grounds safely, and there is an elegance to how he had created his plan that to this day I can’t help but admire. He knew who

had set me up and why. He told me he could gather proof if I could stay hidden for just a few weeks, but I swore him to silence about it."

"Why?" Ivy asks.

"To speak up for me would be to put himself into the center of whatever rivalry I was caught up in. The ones that set me up were just pawns to very powerful vampires. You don't go after a lieutenant as high ranking as Georgescu unless you're nearly as powerful yourself, if not more. Breaking me out of the castle was an unforgivable insult to the entire clan as well – he not only corrupted the course of what passes for due process by the laws of the clan, but he humiliated them by single-handedly taking me out of the castle's well-guarded dungeon. Even if I were exonerated of the crime of murder on his proof, Papa Racoviță would have punished him harshly for that humiliation, and whoever had framed me would most certainly take an even worse revenge on him for revealing their plot."

"I'm glad he's on our side," Ivy says. "He is, isn't he?"

"I don't know," I tell her. "I would like to assume so. He rescued me because we have always been close, and he knew the charges against me were false. He even knew who had set me up, he could prove it. I trust him with my life, because he has shown me that he considers me a brother above and beyond the ties of clan. I believe I am safe with him, but I still would not bet your safety on that. Whatever it is that is drawing the Negre to you is something I do not yet understand so I will not predict the actions of any other vampire that gets close to you or it."

Chapter Nineteen

Ivy Sparks

Day five in the cabin, and I'm stuck between two moods. On the one hand, Ben and I have settled into a rhythm together, and life here actually feels kind of normal. I wake up to Ben making me breakfast. There is even creamer for the coffee that he picked up on his run into town the other evening. It's not the same as actual cream, but it is much closer to what I'm used to. Ben feeds a little bit every day now, so he's not constantly cold to the touch. It also means a little bit of fresh meat every day to mix in with the dehydrated and canned goods stocked up here. During the day, I can forage around a little bit near the cabin, putting the skills Grandma taught me to good use – sometimes, the difference between plant you use for food and one you use for magic is intent. We're early in the year for a lot of the good pickings, like wax currants and other berries, but I still find small amounts of salsify, lambs quarter, and alfalfa. All nice, wild greens that make a decent, if somewhat bitter, fresh salad. Seeing something with bright and lively color on the plate helps a lot.

On the other hand, Ben is very strict that I shouldn't wander too far from the cabin. He lets me go up and down the hill to get close to the roads, but warns me to never get close enough to be seen by passing traffic. The fact that he's run into town twice since we came out here makes him nervous enough. I still have not told him yet that I am a witch, and have

been reluctant to set up a circle on the land. I don't know if he'd be able to recognize it for what it is, but I'm not ready to reveal my craft to him that way. I have been doing what I can to practice what defenses against a vampire I can without a circle or any of my tools. I don't need any of that, of course. Grandma's line learned long ago that all a witch should really need is herself and her training. But never having actually practiced defenses against vampires, I feel like my attempts are weak. Especially since I'm also trying to keep them subtle enough that Ben won't detect them. So I have done nothing actively protective, more attuning myself to his presence and his moods, and being ready to strike if he or one of the ones hunting him ever attempts to harm me.

I miss Grandma terribly, though, and Kate and Nathan most out of all of my friends at school. The hardest thing to admit to myself is how much I miss Carl. Our last conversation together was not civil at all, and we both left feeling hurt and angry. I can now truly understand the people that have lost somebody they were mad at, or who never took that one last chance to say, 'I love you,' to someone before they unexpectedly died. I don't plan on dying out here, and I'm not worried that will happen to Carl, but it still hangs over me constantly that the last thing I said to him was basically get out of my life. Now he's out of it, and I wish I'd never said those words, but I can't take them back. It especially hurts that Ben has spoken so kindly about Carl. Not to mention that since I first kissed Ben, I've had this weird desire to kiss both Carl and Nathan. I wonder if those three men would be able to be friends if they hadn't all been vying for my affection. Carl and Nathan seem to have dealt with it amongst themselves long ago – probably when they both realized that at the time I was interested in neither of them, but with Ben. Well, Ben has what they've both wanted. I have heard so many tales of men who have lost friendships because of a pretty girl coming

between them, and I had always hoped I would not be the pretty girl that did that to anybody, but here I am, barely a week into my first relationship.

I wish more than anything that I could just get some word out that I am alive and unharmed and despite my temporary circumstances, I am happy because I am with a man that I love and he is taking care of me. It is easiest if I think of our time out here as a little bit of a grand adventure that Ben and I are on, a big, long-term game of hide and seek. He says that to let anybody know that I am well right now will put the Negre back on our trail, so we need to wait them out.

I just don't know how I, a mortal girl, will ever wait out a bunch of vampires that will live forever and are known to kill each other over things that happened five hundred years ago. He seems confident, though, that we can do it. Most of the time, I believe him, but him telling me the story of his betrayal, that has had him hiding out from them for more than a decade reminds me of who we are dealing with.

It's a lot to take in, a lot to think about as I'm out wandering around the cabin foraging. I've got my eyes on fallen wood as I look for oyster mushrooms, when I hear a gunshot go off, just a little ways ahead of me. Instinct takes over and I immediately dive for the nearest tree that stands between me and the shot.

I hear somebody say, "What the…" I freeze.

"I didn't see anything," another voice says.

I can hear a little bit of rustling from the direction of the shot, but they don't seem to be moving toward me. I stay as still as I can, breathing as little as I can, thinking as small as I can – tricks Grandma had taught me.

Finally, the first voice speaks up again. "Nothing," he says, and I hear them tromp off down the hill.

Only then do I dare move at all, just enough to look toward the sound they're making. Two guys dressed in camouflage, carrying light rifles. They don't look in my direction at all, just keep walking, looking for something.

When they finally find it, I hear one say, "There you are," then after a second. "Clean shot, Dan. Get a full pelt out of this guy."

I finally let myself relax. Coyote hunters. The season for them runs year-round in Colorado. I get up as quiet as I can, and realize that I'd wandered quite a ways from the cabin while hunting for mushrooms. I tread as light as I can back toward the cabin. I see a No Trespassing sign Ben had set up to mark the property line. I also detect Ben hiding near it, using one of the vampire wards I'm practicing. I decide to give no sign I'm aware of him.

As I'm passing the sign Ben whispers, "Ivy!"

I jump and yelp, and look around for him, but it isn't until I hear him say my name again that I look at him. He's crouched down on the ground, and I walked so close that I'd nearly stepped on him. His clothing, all in muted shades of tan and green, seems to blend into the leaf litter around him. But it's not Ben. It is his voice, but the face is completely different. I jump back again and nearly scream, this time for real.

He stands up, and I realize as he moves that his clothes aren't actually camouflaged. He's wearing a dark maroon shirt and black jeans. And it is Ben. I don't know why I thought just moment ago that he was somebody else, just the same way that I can't understand why just a moment ago all of his clothes were a different color. I wonder if whatever he just did to me is what makes it safe for him to go into town every few evenings.

"Did they see you?" Ben asks me.

"No," I say.

"Did they hear you or otherwise know you were there?"

I swallow and look at my feet.

“Did they?” Ben asks again, this time with a different tone in his voice.

“I heard them shoot and just threw myself at the ground. They heard that, but never saw me. They’re just out hunting coyotes,” I say in one quick rush of words.

“It doesn’t matter what they were doing out here, Ivy. Stokers Mill is a small place, and in small places, word gets around when somebody goes missing. If you suddenly appear again, people will notice. People outside of the immediate area.”

“I know, Ben,” I say.

“Back to the cabin,” he says.

I’ve never heard Ben be so short with me before, nor have I ever seen him scowl at me as he is now.

“Go!” he snaps, quietly.

I want to snap back at him, but realize my feet have started moving on their own. I actually feel the desire to have some words with him dissipate. It doesn’t last long, just a dozen steps, but every bit of willpower I can muster can’t fight it. I am tempted to pull out some magic to fight it, but it’s too late for that. He’s already gotten the upper hand, and if I push back now with power of my own, he’ll certainly notice it.

“What did you just to do me?” I ask Ben.

“Same thing I did in the car a couple of days ago.”

“I don’t like it,” I say.

“Good. You’re not supposed to. I can’t do it for long, just a couple of minutes, and I can’t make you do anything that will bring you harm, but you see what I can do.”

“Why are you doing it?” I ask him.

Ben stops walking. “Ivy,” he says. “Look at me.”

His face is much softer now, his voice much gentler. “What?” I finally get to snap back at him.

“I’m doing this because I need you to understand what we’re dealing with. We are strong and powerful and terrible things, Ivy. Walk.” Ben points toward the cabin.

I turn away from him and start walking again, as if I’d always wanted to.

“Tell me your very oldest memory of something other than your parents,” he says.

“My second day of kindergarten,” I say. I don’t even have to think about what I want to tell him. The memory just shoots right up out of the back of my mind. “Grandma dropped me off. Because it was the second day, she wasn’t allowed to come in with me. Only on the very first day was that allowed. I was so shy then, you really wouldn’t believe it. Me, scared to be around so many other people and having no idea how to talk to any of them! I just walked across the playground and into the building and looked for my classroom, the one with the big ‘K’ on the door. I just needed to be away from everybody!”

I can’t help but smile at the next part of the memory. “But there was already somebody in the classroom. I actually stamped my foot and told her to get out! She looked up at me as if I’d just kicked her puppy and started crying. I felt so terrible about that, that I ran up to her and gave her a huge hug and told her I was sorry, and that my name was Ivy. She told me her name was Kate.”

“That’s when you met one of your best friends?” Ben asks.

“Yes. Nathan was in that class, too, but I didn’t get to know him for a couple more weeks. He was a lot more reserved then.” I realize that my

answer to the second question didn’t feel like Ben had pulled it out of me. It was just me speaking, answering a casual question.

“You did it to me again, didn’t you?” I ask him.

“Yes. We can compel an honest answer out of somebody. Just one or two questions is all, but if you ask the right questions, that’s all you need. Just like I can only control you for very short periods, and each time I do it, you can resist it more.”

“So eventually, you’ll no longer be able to compel an answer from me?” I stop walking toward the cabin and turn to face him.

“Correct,” Ben says. “If you’d like, I can do it enough to you, over the next few days, to let you resist me completely.”

“Will it let me also resist other vampires?” I ask him.

“It will help greatly, but there are some out there much stronger than me that could still have some advantage over you. It won’t be as strong, though, and you will be able to resist it sooner.”

“Then you should do it,” I say.

“I will,” Ben says. “But don’t let it lull you into a false sense of security. I can help teach you to resist us, but others are still vulnerable. Did you notice how quick you gave me the memory I asked you for? Normally, people take a bit to think about what that memory is.”

“Yes.”

“If either of those hunters had actually seen you, and a vampire asked them what they saw, they would give up more details than they had consciously noticed at the time. Even if they wanted to hide something, if somehow they got the sense that they needed to protect you, whoever you were to them, they wouldn’t be able to. Do you understand?”

“I do,” I tell him. I start walking toward the cabin again, this time by my own choice. “The way you’ve described the other vampires. A lot of

them are evil, aren't they, Ben?"

"Yes."

"These kinds of powers you're showing me, that's part of what does it to them, isn't it? They see us as weak, as less than they are, and they hold us all in contempt."

"Exactly," Ben says. "Remember what I told you about how easy it is to be cruel to something you no longer recognize as human."

"It's possible to be different, though. You are different. You are kind to us. Your brother that helped you escape the castle. He's a good person, isn't he?" As I ask this, I understand that what I'm really asking is whether it's possible to use such intense power responsibly. I'm at the age now where Grandma will start training me in earnest. As soon as Ben and I come out of hiding, that is. I know Grandma is an upright and a good person, but I need to know that people like her and Ben, who use great power with kindness and compassion, are not true anomalies, that there are others like them out in the world to balance out the evil ones.

Ben walks in silence for a while before answering me. "Remember, that I came to be who I am now only by sinking to depths that now horrify me. It was only by looking at myself and seeing nothing but darkness looking back at me that I set myself on the path to where I am now. My brother had the same experience. He was a very dark creature at one time, too."

We get back to the cabin. I walk around to the back, where there's not a real porch, just a few steps down from the door. But it's in the shade. I sit down and gesture for Ben to sit next to me. Looking back on my life, especially since high school, I can see there have been times when my popularity has gotten the better of me. I was never one of those terrible girls, never a bully, but there were times when I turned away genuine

attempts at friendship because I didn't think somebody was really worthy of my time and attention.

Then I look at how things have gone with Ben and me. Ben was such an outcast at the school, would still be if we were in class today instead of out here. I was one of the few that accepted when he reached out. Maybe I had my own flirtation with the darkness that power and influence can give you, and maybe seeing just a little bit of it was the nudge I needed to not really go down that road and become a horrible person.

But the fact is, at one time not too long ago, I did have it. I liked the sense that I was unapproachable, that a word or a glance from me carried more weight than it did with anybody else. I loved the fact that I could use magic, real magic that nobody else around me knows anything about. I chose to be a better person then, but what if the temptation were greater? Like when the magic I know is substantial and strong? The way Ben describes it, a lot of vampires, maybe even most of them, give in to the temptation. Even my loving and kind Ben may never tell me just how far down he'd gone before he came back. Then I start to wonder what kind of person I might be if I had both Ben's blood and Grandma's teaching. This terrifies me.

"Promise me something," I say. I don't know what is making me speak now. It's not Ben that has words coming out of me. I don't think I'm doing it. Maybe it is the spirit of my better nature taking control of my voice.

"Anything," Ben says.

"Promise me you'll never turn me. What you have. I don't want it."

"I told you before, I wouldn't turn you, even if you asked me to. I know that the life I live is not truly a good one. Certainly not better than the one you have."

“Don’t dance around it, Ben. Promise me. Promise me that you will never turn me.”

Ben turns to face me fully. He puts his hands on my cheeks, and looks straight into my eyes. “I promise, Ivy. I will never turn you. I promise that I will never turn you into what I am.”

“Thank you,” I say. As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I have to turn away from him and look down. The intensity of his gaze while he made that promise was almost unbearable. That intensity, though, convinced me that he was speaking from the heart.

“One other thing I would like to promise you,” Ben says.

“What?” I look into his eyes again.

“I will give you the best life than any warm woman could possibly have.”

This brings a smile to my face.

“I will try to do something, every single day that you walk this earth, to make it a beautiful day for you.”

I lean into him, and he wraps his arms around me in a big hug. I rest my hand on his shoulder, and he kisses the top of my head.

“What are you going to do to make today a beautiful day?” I ask.

“Come here,” Ben says. He stands up and offers me a hand. We go into the cabin, and he goes into the little cabinet in the bedroom where he keeps his spare clothes.

“When I was out the other night getting you new clothes,” he says, pulling a paper bag out from the bottom of a stack of his jeans. The bag is horribly gaudy, pink on pink stripes. It has to be from that adult store he told me about. “I swear, that what’s inside is nowhere near as tacky as the packaging. But when you’re ready again, I got you something to wear.”

I take the bag from him. Whatever is inside is either very light and fine fabric, not much fabric, or both. I open the bag enough to take a peek inside, and see something in a soft, pale green.

“That shade should stand out nice against your skin,” Ben says.

I look at my hands. A lot of bold colors really do make me look even paler than I actually am, and not in the lovely porcelain doll way. I think he’s right, the softer color will suit me. “And the green will go nice with my eyes,” I say.

Chapter Twenty

Nathan Marsh

“Hello,” I say into my phone.

“She’s back in town,” Emily says. I can tell by the tone of her voice that she means the hunter, not Ivy.

“Where?”

“She’s gone back up that trail over the house, same place you pointed out to me before.”

“Is she still there?”

“No. She was by while I was on the road. That’s all I got out of the imp.”

“Is the imp still present?” I ask.

“Yes, and it’s a difficult little bastard. It’ll only tell me that she was here, looked in on the house, and left.”

“I can be there in twenty minutes,” I say. Stationing an imp on the trail to watch it is an unconventional solution to watching a piece of property, given the capriciousness of imps, but with my influence upon the little demon, we might be making it work. The hunter is just too good for Emily to monitor physically, and magic is of extremely limited use as passive surveillance. We will decide, based on whether the imp cooperates with me or not, whether using one is a workable solution.

I am loathe to leave my overnight surveillance of Carl's house, because he is still very touchy and volatile, but a chance to get some solid information about the hunter is too good to pass up. I just have to hope that Carl stays home for a while instead of going out looking for Ivy and Ben again. Now that we know for sure that the hunter is back in town and sniffing around, the only safe assumption is that she will come around to check on Carl some time, too. I know that he is closing in fast on Ivy and Ben, and I need to keep the hunter from following him out anywhere near them if he goes out looking again.

I briefly consider using my telekinesis to temporarily disable his car while I am gone, but his knowledge of vehicles is vastly superior to mine. Anything I can think of to keep him from using his car would be easy enough for him to diagnose.

Fretting over that, however, is getting me no information, so I have to take my chances. Besides, it is about three in the morning. It is likely that if he has not left his house yet, he will not do so until it is time to go to school. I cover the distance to Emily's house quickly, and find her outside waiting for me.

"Let's go," she says, before I even set foot outside my car. The imp must be annoying her something fierce for her to be so curt with me.

We make our way carefully up the ridge behind the house, taking great pains to leave no prints of our own, and to break no twigs or branches. If the hunter is going to continue to watch the house, we want her to feel secure returning to the same place to do so.

I can feel the binding spell Emily cast, with my help, long before I can see the darkness that emanates from it. It is only when I have direct line of sight to the center of the spell's focus that I can see the deeper blackness standing out against the darkness of the woods at night. Though the focus is

small, it is intense, so much that the baleful red light of the imp's eyes does not escape it, even though I know it is looking right at me. I know it wants to pretend it does not see me. I could order it out, or even draw it forth, but this particular kind of imp responds best to silent threats. I just stop on the trail, and look toward the focus, as if it is the least interesting thing I have seen all day.

Emily looks askance at me, but does not say anything. She knows by now to trust me when it comes to dealing with such creatures.

Finally, the little imp can take my nonchalance no longer, and it cautiously emerges from the focus.

I speak several syllables it would be impossible to render in any human alphabet, and that are best not described to people who do not know how to shield themselves from infernal energies. The imp responds with a lengthy spill of similar sounds that do not carry the same intense force as when they are spoken in my voice.

I ask it a few questions, and it hurriedly chatters its answers at me, as if suddenly becoming very aware of how quickly it wants to be anywhere but in front of me. I am reminding it that when we had set the focus, I had clearly stated that Emily spoke with the same authority as me regarding its task. The foolish imp decided to play around with the meaning of my words. I share with it a bit of knowledge, the names of a few other imps that have crossed me, and suggest that it do better in its next dealings with Emily.

With the imp's full report given to me, and us having a renewed understanding of its relationship with Emily, I release it to retreat back into the focus until the next time a vampire comes up on one of the trails over the house.

“As with last time, the hunter came up here with infrared and optical equipment, and spent some time looking over the grounds. She is now also armed against both vampires and werewolves, and had some sort of attachment for her binoculars that seemed intended to specifically look for evidence of a werewolf’s presence. The vampire clans have had glass for a few years now that can pick up traces of a vampire’s passage. It appears they are now experimenting with the same for lycanthropes. If I am remembering Ben’s recent history correctly, he has been in hiding long enough that he may not know of the existence of either type of glass.”

“Carl is here all the time. If this stuff works, will the hunter be able to tell that?”

“I do not know,” I tell Emily. “The vampire glass is not very reliable, and gives very little information currently. A vampire has to spend a significant amount of time in a place to leave enough essence around. I do not know if the lycanthrope glass is any more reliable.”

“What else?” she asks me.

“The imp says she was frustrated again to find nobody home, but had not gone any closer to the house. Once she came up here, the imp remained with her until she was off the property. So thus far, we have no proof that she has come any closer than this spot.”

“So is it safe to assume she knows nothing about the circles?” Emily asks, pointing to the woods beyond the house on the other side of the property.

“I would cautiously say so, but not positively. We know for sure she has been here, but we have no idea if she has been over there. Neither you nor I have seen any sign, but remember, she is very good at evading physical detection.”

“At least I’ve been able to keep any rumors from floating around town.”

“You and Ivy have been stellar on that count. Even Carl does not know.”

“Carl’s training was extremely focused,” Emily reminds me.

He had been raised from birth to kill vampires, and nothing else. It would not surprise me there were not so much as an allusion to witches in his training, as well as no mention of creatures like myself.

“I should get back to Carl’s place,” I tell Emily. “I have not noticed any evidence of the hunter near there, but I do suspect she will be there soon enough. The imp told me he did detect better weapons for fighting lycanthropes in her possession, so she is prepared for an encounter, whether she initiates it or finds herself in it.”

“He’s pretty conflicted on his feelings about Ivy lately. Fortunately, he’s not mad at her, upset at the situation more. But he needs to be receptive to her when he finally does see her again. Her feelings for him have been changing lately, and she’s going to surprise him very soon. If you can make sure to keep nudging him away from being mad at her if you see him drifting that way, it would be good.”

“Are you coming perilously close to sharing the prophecy about Ivy with me?” I ask her, stepping away, turning my back on her even as I start to walk down the hill back toward the house.

“I am giving you only one small part, that does not say anything about your future that will bring the inevitable to pass with the least amount of damage.”

“Please, do not,” I tell her. “Fate must run its own course, without my hand guiding anything. I want no knowledge about what you know. None!” That last bit comes out both sharper than I intend it, and not as strong as I

would like it to be. Even if I am angry with Emily for laying that information upon me, for the risk to my well-being it creates, I do not wish to end our conversation on me snapping at her.

"Your forgiveness, please," I say. "Just remember that I have made it clear that if I am bound up in Ivy's fate, let the winds blow me as they will. The outcome for Ivy will still be as you've foreseen, and I will come to and cause less harm on the way."

"This prophecy…" Emily starts.

"Please," I say. "Respect my wishes on this count. If Carl or Ivy needs guidance, getting me involved will not actually help. All of history backs me up."

Emily touches my shoulder. "I'm sorry," she says. "The future always seems much more uncertain when it's one of your own."

"So do the wise thing, old wise woman. Let fate fall as it will from this starting point until the end. Changing the starting point does not change the end. It never has and never will. You yourself have given that counsel. Heed it now."

Emily laughs, bitterly. "My words never sound so wise in my own ears as I think they do coming out of your mouth."

"Tricky thing about wisdom, that is," I say. "I will be in touch tomorrow."

"I will make sure Carl comes over after school tomorrow, so you can take an evening off from watching him. I'm sure you have other things to do."

The next day, I struggle to pay attention to anything at school, with the hunter on my mind, and with Carl still being so close to losing control all of the time. I get caught up afterwards helping Kate study, and doing my best to keep her from going to Emily's house to give her a piece of her mind

about hiding where Ivy is. Almost all of the time, the loyalty that Ivy's friends have for her is a powerful asset. Right now, it seems half of the town is on edge and wanting to go out and overturn every rock within a hundred miles looking for her. At least this is creating a background of chaos around Ivy that will impede the hunter's work at finding her by trying to glean information from the locals.

A little bit after seven, Emily calls me to say Carl has left her house, and is quite angry. He had promised he would go directly home, but she is concerned that his agitation will drive him to break that promise. She says she can tell where he is at any time that he is in human form, but if the wolf comes out, she is powerless to keep track of him.

I am certain that Ben and Ivy are way too far away for Carl to pursue without driving, so I try to assure her things are well, but she still asks that I keep an eye on him for the night. I do my best to politely finish up with Kate and head over to Carl's house.

I stop a good deal down the road from his house, park, and find a very discrete place to rid myself of my mortal weight. I take to the air and allow light to pass through me as effortless as I pass through the wind. I want to get a good look around as much of Carl's property as I can, and with dusk approaching, it is not too much of a drain on me to both fly and remain hidden from physical sight. As soon as I get into the air, I see the hunter's motorcycle, concealed not too far from where I had hidden my car. The hunter is not on it, but the engine is still very warm, as if she had just shut it off within the past few minutes. I do not see her on the road to Carl's place, so I must have just missed her getting there. I immediately turn my attention to his house. I detect body heat inside, but it is definitely not Carl – I have watched him this way enough to know the shape of his warmth as well as I know the shape of his face. His car is not in the garage, either, but

Emily has not called to tell me he had gone anywhere. I can only assume now that whatever means she was using to track him, he has eluded it.

I turn my attention back out from the house again, seeking the hunter. I finally find her, in the woods well behind Carl's house. She is barely warmer than her surroundings – how judiciously she must feed that she has been so cold every time I have seen her – but I can see the heat of a phone in her hand. Looking back to Carl's house, at the body heat of whomever is inside, I see they also have a phone in operation. Seems our little hunter has worked around the prohibition against entering a home uninvited by sending somebody in for her. A search up and down the block shows a warm car, three houses down, in the opposite direction of the hunter's motorcycle. I assume that she is working with a known associate of hers. It takes skill to break into a house and search for things on behalf of someone else; it is not something that a mortal can be compelled to do competently.

I let myself slowly alight on the roof, so I can feel around a little more to see if I can determine what the mortal inside is doing. I have been inside the house enough to know its layout very well. Right now, the spy is in Carl's bedroom, going through his dresser. Since he is present in the home, I can tell where he has been, and he is on a very methodical search of the place, lingering anywhere Carl keeps things that appear important. This person seems to be very professional at their task. Finding out more about him seems to be a wise idea.

I am very unhappy to have her helper inside of Carl's house, though. Carl is a young lycanthrope, trained from birth for a war that ended before he got thrown into it. He has never faced down a vampire in a fight. I do not know if the hunter will be able to ascertain that from her proxy search of his home, what information different clues may give her. But if she is as skilled as I think she is, it is possible that she could find a way to eliminate him

without vampiric involvement being known. The only werewolves that really know much of Carl are the foster parents that abandoned him. Everybody else was just a cohort at one short training camp or another. When the werewolves had to adapt to traveling in smaller and less centralized and controlled packs, they started to raise their pups without much true and deep attachment to each other. Teach them that pack was who you were with today, not who you were with yesterday. It was a security measure then – if a lycanthrope truly knows nothing important about any other lycanthrope, they cannot give any meaningful information away. Now it is a liability, as young men and women like Carl live often in isolation from their kind, bearing their secrets alone, having nobody that understands intimately what it is like to have a hungry wolf inside of them.

If this hunter, a Negre, realizes she can kill Carl without risking the Truce at all, I fear his days are severely numbered. And here is where I curse Emily five ways from the dark moon. My own sense of the future tells me this hunter needs to remain alive for some time. Emily tells me Carl must be reunited with Ivy, on ‘receptive’ terms. How do I meet the demands of both futures? A day ago, I would have made the decision to leave the hunter alive, and leave it to Carl’s fate whether the hunter takes his pelt. Now, I know that I have to keep both of them alive. I am obligated to protect both of them, which means starting to actively manipulate their movements to keep them apart from each other.

I decide to take a chance, a calculated risk which only barely gives me a number I like. What if I can get her and her associate away from the house before she gets a critical amount of information on Carl?

If the hunter’s motorcycle has trackers on it so her movements can be reconstructed by the Negre later if they need, she certainly has something simple on her phone that would tell her if it is moving without her on it. I

land on her bike, use my telekinesis to turn the ignition without the key, and switch back to my mortal shape.

An hour later, the machine is just about out of fuel, and I am seventy miles, straight line, away from Carl's house, but there are nearly a hundred fresh miles on the odometer, with all of the switchbacks and curves I take coming down from the ridge into the river valley. I make a partial transformation, pulling out my wings, so I can fly free after I gun the engine at a switchback, and the motorcycle launches itself off the road and down a ravine.

I do not know for sure if the hunter did indeed have some means of knowing that I had ridden off with her transportation, or if she had even left Carl's house as I did so, but at this moment, she is most certainly inconvenienced. That is enough for me. I keep to the air and start to fly back toward where my car is parked, on Carl's road.

Chapter Twenty-One

Carl Wilson

All my life, I have had to lie about my true nature to protect myself and so many others like me, which is a lie that I'm usually comfortable with. At the back of my mind, though, I have always wondered what it would be like if Ivy and I ever had gotten together. I can't imagine that I would have been able to keep that secret from her for long. For starters, I'm not sure how I would ever explain a cage in a soundproofed cell in the basement for when I needed to rage out.

Kate's interest in me has brought those thoughts to the fore again. I can tell by her scent every time I'm near her that a kiss is mine for the taking. But I can't bring myself to do it. Honestly, I'm still hurting about Ivy, but more of it is that I can't bring myself to pursue something with her while I'm lying to her about her best friend. And then, I have to decide what to do about the wolf. There are just too many things going on, too much I have to hide right now. For all that she's teased me over the time we've known each other, she still deserves to have me as straight and honest with her as I can actually be.

It's been more than a week now that I've been covering for Ivy and Ben. It's starting to wear on me, beyond my budding feelings for Kate. Every day, I slip one falsehood or another a dozen times or more, as people

ask me if I've heard anything from them or from Grandma. I am still doing my best to trust her that she truly is safe, but it's hard.

Grandma and I haven't seen each other since we met at the truck stop. I know she's been back home for a couple of days, but we haven't been in touch. Also her idea, part of her drive to keep me as far from Ivy as possible. The one thing that lets me keep all of this anger and frustration under control is Ben's warning that the Negre would find her through me if I didn't back off. I know there's absolutely no way Grandma would be conspiring with Ben to deceive me, so the fact that both of them independently have warned me off of her trail is a truth that I must grudgingly accept.

But I am also incapable of inaction. For the past three nights, I have gone down to the cage and let the wolf out, because he is running so hot and so close to the surface. By the time I leave school every day, I swear that if one more person asks me about Ivy, the wolf is going to go for their throat.

As a compromise with myself, after school I drive to Ivy's house. Grandma is deep in the engine block of her semi taking care of something. "Grab a couple of cold ones for us," she says as I approach, without extracting herself from her work. "And that spare pair of coveralls from the garage."

I grab a couple of beers from the fridge in the kitchen, and put the coveralls on over my school clothes. I open a bottle and set it on the step of the truck next to Grandma.

"I've already got the clean side," she says, finally pulling her head out of the engine. "Guess what that means?"

I know exactly what that means. I pull the creeper over and lay down on it, wheeling myself underneath the truck.

"I knew I should have called you before I started on this," she says.

Once I’m down there, I know exactly why. There’s a bolt she needs to loosen to adjust the timing belt that is in a truly awkward place. The easiest way to get to it is to have one person underneath the engine guide the socket, on a long extension rod, to the bolt, while somebody else turns the ratchet from above. There is already one socket on the ground next to me, and I can see the bright chrome of another one glinting at me from the top of the oil pan. Once I’m in position, she starts to snake a third socket down toward me. I guide it to the bolt and hold it in place while she cranks.

I’m still pretty clean, just a little bit of grime and dirt shook free while we got the bolt loosened. The dirty part comes when Grandma starts the truck. More of the gunk the truck picks up on its thousand-mile days rattles free while the engine shakes from so many moving parts being out of synch with each other. Since I’ve got a shorter reach to the adjustment screw for the timing gear, it’s up to me to shoot a strobe light up at the belt and slowly turn the screw, tightening and loosening in increasingly small increments, until a couple of indicator lines synchronize perfectly with the flashing light. The light makes it easier to figure out which way to adjust the timing initially, but the final setting is done completely by feel. As I zero in on perfect synchronization, the engine stops vibrating and shaking things into my face, and instead starts to hum like a purring kitten.

“Nice work,” Grandma says, and starts to thread the socket down to me so she can tighten the one difficult bolt. “Took you longer than usual, though,” she says.

She won’t admit it, but there is one bracket attached to the engine that’s worn out and needs to be replaced. That bracket is the reason we have to adjust the timing belt every couple of months.

“You know I’m less than relaxed these days,” I tell her, turning the adjustment screw a tiny bit to compensate for the bolt she just tightened.

“Yeah. You’re keeping everybody off her trail, though, right?”

“I am, Grandma,” I say.

She finishes tightening the bolt, and I gently release the socket so she can move on to the two bolts that she can reach easily from the top of the engine.

“Good,” she says. “I wish I could give you something to tell you it’s all worth it, but I can’t,” she says. “I know they haven’t been caught yet, so there’s that.”

I back off the adjustment screw a tad, as she tightens another and moves on to the last one.

“Would you know?” I ask.

“There’s a vampire in the Fersiu clan I know that lives out in Wisconsin. Not much happens with the Negre that she doesn’t know about. But seriously, Carl. Keep yourself ignorant on that count, alright? The less we know the less we can let slip. Now get your mind back on the task at hand.”

For the last bolt, I have to keep actively adjusting the timing while Grandma tightens it down. It is almost impossible to adjust the timing by yourself because of this, which tells me she was expecting me to come by right about when I did. Knowing that she can predict me like that frustrates me, and I keep on overcompensating with the screwdriver. Grandma, at least, doesn’t get on me about that. She just patiently backs the bolt off every time I mess up and we start again.

Once we’ve finally get that last bolt taken care of, I grab the couple sockets she’d dropped earlier and wheel out from underneath the truck. She gives me a damp towel to wipe my face and hair off with. “It’s getting warm,” she says, handing me my beer and leading me to the slop sink in the garage, where we both wash up properly.

I stick around for dinner, just for something to do instead of fret at home. It's hard for Grandma and me to not talk about Ivy in the house she lives in, that is full of her stuff, but we somehow manage. I spend some time talking with Grandma about Kate and the wolf. It's not a problem she has, but she at least understands. Being one of the few pinkies that knows about both us werewolves and the zombies, she has spent most of her life keeping secrets from people she'd rather not lie to. The one time we drift into talking about Ivy is when she needs to unload a bit about how hard it was for her to not tell her exactly why she was so against her getting involved with Ben.

At the end of the night, I drive home, happy that I'll be able to sleep in my own bed instead of raging in the basement. Sharing a burden always lightens it. Even if Grandma and I each had to take some weight from the other, the fact that we each had the chance to unload a bit makes the total load between us lighter and easier to carry.

Unfortunately, I wake up the next morning feeling on edge again. I don't immediately know why, but there's something nagging at the back of my mind. When I get to school, I can see that Kate and Nathan are off as well. We sit down on the stairs in our usual spot, and none of us speak for a while. Kate leans in a bit toward me, but that scent on her neck isn't as strong. I try to make a bit of small talk, but it goes nowhere.

Finally, Nathan breaks it. "I can't believe she's throwing so much away!"

"She's got ten minutes to prove she isn't," Kate says.

That's when it hits me. For the past couple of days, both of them have been trying not to mention Ivy as they prepared for their Honors Literature midterm. Ivy is in the running for a major scholarship if she can get an A in her Honors Lit class. If she fails the midterm or takes an incomplete for

truancy, there's no way she can get better than a low B for the course, even if she gets perfect marks on everything else.

The fact that she is not sitting on the steps with us, that her car is still not in the parking lot, makes it clear that she's almost certainly not going to be in her seat in first period for the exam.

"Why didn't you just smack him right on out of town that day?" Kate asks me. "I guarantee you, every one of us would say he started it if you had."

That's not what I need to hear right then. "I guess the one time I let my better nature guide my hand was the wrong time," I say.

"If I ever see him again, I'll tell you what will be guiding my hand," Nathan says. "Are you sure we can't go to Denver and knock on every single hotel room door until we find them?"

"If they're even still in Denver," I say.

"What?" Nathan and Kate ask in unison.

"Has she been in touch?" Nathan asks.

"I had dinner at the house last night." It's work to get the next words out. So many lies to protect that stupid zombie. "Grandma and she still share a credit card account. She says she's not in Denver, but all of her spending looks kind of normal, whatever that means."

"Where is she?" Kate asks.

"She wouldn't tell me."

"We're going over after school tonight," Kate says to Nathan and me. "We're sitting her down and making her talk."

"I can't," I say.

"You can skip work for this," Nathan says.

"No, no," I say. "It's not about work. I just can't. It was rough being at the house last night with her gone, and knowing who she's with," I say. "I

just can’t go back tonight.”

Kate looks at me. “Still love her?” she asks, taking her fingers and gently pushing my gray lock of hair back behind my ear. It’s not an accusation she’s making. It’s driven by sympathy.

Nathan also reaches a hand out and puts it on my shoulder. I know he gets what I’m feeling.

I can’t speak at the moment. My throat is too tight. I just nod, very slightly.

“Well, if we manage to get it out of her, we’re recruiting you for the rescue party, alright?”

I nod again.

Kate runs a finger through my odd colored streak of hair again, and rests her hand on mine. “I understand,” she whispers, just for me. “Let’s both take our time, ok?” Her touch is extremely tender, I would say almost loving. And the erotic scent of desire is absent from the skin on her wrist.

The bell rings. Kate and Nathan shuffle to their Honors Lit exam. I vainly hope their concern for Ivy doesn’t cause them to do poorly. I don’t go inside right away. I call Grandma real quick to fill her in on my latest diversion in the hunt for Ivy and Ben, and to warn her that she’s going to have two furious people showing up at her house in about nine hours.

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Pushing the responsibility for Kate and Nathan off onto Grandma does very little to improve my mood, though. When I see them later in the day, they’re still horribly worried and upset. We have an awkward lunch together and they don’t say anything when I just start walking home at the end of the day.

When I get up to my house, I don’t even go inside to drop off my books, I just go right to my car. I sit there with the keys in the ignition,

trying to talk myself out of what I'm about to do, but I fail. I have to sate at least a little bit of my curiosity. I remember the drive home from the movie with Nathan and Kate.

I had been too lost in thought on the drive to have marked how far out of town we were when I saw Ben skulking in the tree line. I started watching for landmarks right after that, though. Unfortunately, the darkness along that highway at night is pretty thirsty, and there are so many curves that none of them really stands out as significant.

I can at least guess which five mile stretch or so it was on, because I remember passing the intersection of the highway with Bela Lane a few minutes afterwards. It's not much, but it's a start. I drive up and down that stretch as slow as I can without being a traffic hazard, desperately looking for anything that seems familiar from the other night. I know that the easiest thing to do would be to park the car and let the wolf out to sniff around. But I'd never get it back on its leash if it caught scent of either zombie boy or Ivy. If the wolf gets close to Ben, one of us is done. Finished. I have a strong enough instinct for self-preservation that I choose not to start that fight, because if Ben is as good as I suspect he is, it's not likely to go well for me.

I also love Ivy, still, way too much to put her through that. She doesn't need to see it. A fight between a zombie and a wolf is a terrible thing to behold.

I allow myself one more slow drive down the stretch of highway where I think I saw Ben. I roll the window down, knowing there's no way I'd be able to smell him in human form from a moving car, but it somehow makes me feel a little bit better.

I hit the end of the length of highway I'd targeted, based on a pair of white stones set near each other right off the road. They seemed to make a

good marker for me to roughly guess where I should start looking for any sign of Ben's hideout. A quarter mile later, I notice another pair of similar stones. This can't be a coincidence.

I pull the car over at the next driveway and walk over to the nearest pair of stones. Each of them is big and heavy, about two feet square. Most of the rocks in this area are deep gray, so they stand out. They're just bright enough that they'd even stand out at night.

Treading as lightly as I can, to not leave any tracks of my own, I start to examine the ground around them, looking for footprints or any other sign that the stones mark a path.

I find nothing, so if anybody is walking around here, they are at least as careful as I am with their steps.

One thing I do notice is that there's a wrinkle in the land that runs downhill from where I'm standing, the kind you'd use if you want to walk around without drawing much attention to yourself.

I continue on to the other pair of stones, and sure enough, they are also not far from what looks like a game trail that runs along a fallen tree. I know the wolf wants to come out and test the air for me, but if I am where I think I am, nothing good will come of it.

I tell the wolf to back down and go back to my car. I've gotten close enough for now. If I feel I really need to go looking for Ben and Ivy now, I know where to start. It's not much, but it's enough for now.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ben Wake

“Good night, my love…”

That is my cue that Ivy will be asleep within a minute. I keep reading for two more, just to be sure, before I put the book down. I continue to hold onto her for a while, until I feel her breathing shift as she falls into a deeper level of sleep. Only then do I carefully slip my arm out from under her head and slip out of bed.

A cold front moved through today, bringing rain with it. It’s almost cold in the cabin. Something I barely notice, but she certainly has. Before I walk away from the bed, I pull the covers up to her chin and tuck her in. I stroke her hair one more time before I leave…

…And my sense shows me a moment in our lives. Ivy looking ill, pale. “I need you to turn me, Ben…”

I jerk my hand back, sudden enough to wake her.

“What?” she asks me.

“Sorry,” I say. “I slipped while trying to sneak out without waking you.”

“Really? And I wasn’t awake to see it?”

“Apparently not,” I say, puzzled.

“You’re elegant, Ben. I’ve never seen you be anything but graceful.”

I kiss her cheek. “Next time I stumble, I be sure it happens right in front of you.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t. Ruin my mental image of you…”

I kiss her again, letting it linger this time. She nestles into the covers a bit more. “I’ll put another log on before I leave the cabin,” I say, leaning forward to brush my cheek against hers.

“Love you,” she says, and drifts off again.

When she’s asleep, I touch her again the same way I did when I got the flash of my sense, but it does not return. It most likely will never come again. This is why it is so important for me to listen to what it says and to figure out the right course of action quickly.

I am so distracted by this that I barely remember to go outside and grab another log to put on the small fire in the bedroom. I keep a supply of very dry wood inside for when we need a fire during the day. The drier the wood, the less smoke it makes. At night, it’s not as much of a concern, so I can use the stuff that’s been outside in the damp.

Once I know Ivy is fully settled in and will be warm for a few hours, I start my first patrol of the night around the big stretch of land around our little hideout. It’s times like these that I envy the thropes. They could smell the passage of a vampire for hours afterwards. It made it hard to hunt them, because they could tell if you were closing in on them.

There are still ways, though. Not as reliable as a thrope’s nose, but they work most of the time. My first patrol takes me two full hours, as I make all of my checks, happily finding no evidence of any of my kind near the cabin. After that, I allow myself to sit out in a clearing a couple hundred yards upslope from the cabin and look up at the stars. The Lyrid meteor shower is happening tonight. It’s not as impressive as the ones in late summer and autumn, but it is beautiful nonetheless. Being out in the

wooded valleys, not a single streetlight or house light visible at all, the light pollution of Denver hidden behind several mountains, even the warm would be able to see one shooting star after another. With my vampiric vision, I can see so many more than they can.

I find my thoughts drifting back to my sense, of Ivy asking me to turn her. As I replay the scene over and over in my mind, turn it over, examine every detail I can recall, I am more and more certain that it is not a warning, but an inevitability. I get up and walk, feeling the slope under me to find the right angle I recall, looking for a long, low, gray line of rock thrusting up through the soil and leaf litter. Once I catch sight of the rock and at about the right part of the slope, I sidestep right and left, rotating until I am in the exact place as in my sense.

I look around me, trying to figure out what might be important about this exact place. I'm just out of sight of the cabin. Nowhere near either road, still far from the property line. The bare rock shields one of the two escape routes up to the road above the cabin, but the sense didn't have us on the route, no sense of urgency that we were fleeing.

One of the things I realize about the image is that the scene is just before full darkness, the hour that I am usually returning if I've made a quick run into town for supplies, to make sure I am back before she is at the greatest risk from any vampires coming onto the land. I wonder if that is significant, that she is meeting me as I come back from town, instead of staying safe inside the cabin like she is supposed to. Vampires cannot enter anybody else's home unless invited, so I always impress upon her the importance of never, ever leaving the cabin when I am not on the land.

"I need you to turn me, Ben…"

What could possibly bring her out of the cabin to meet me here? She looked pale in the image, paler than she usually is. Will she be ill at the

time? I get down on hands and knees, looking at the plants around this spot, but I have no knowledge of what they might be useful for. Ivy knows, but I have never had any reason to learn anything like that. Even plucking some of the leaves and sniffing them to see if any smell more astringent or medicinal than others, I can't tell.

It also does not help that in the vision, we are standing very close to each other, embracing. I can only see her face, not the rest of her body. The sense does not give me any idea of what she will feel like at that moment. Will she be thin? Cold? Trembling? There will be a waver in her voice, but I don't know if it will be emotional effort or physical weakness.

I spend another ten minutes with my thoughts and memory of the sense running circles around themselves and going nowhere when I finally force myself to give up, and take my next patrol for the night, the one that goes all the way out to the property lines and the roads.

A couple more hours of stalking silently through the woods, checking every little indicator I've set out, shows me that nothing larger than a big raccoon or a small coyote has been through. I check the hidden rope handles on the emergency boxes at the end of each of the escape runs. Nothing has disturbed the boxes at all.

There's something that bothers me about one of the boxes at the road above the cabin. I carefully search the area around it again, looking close at the rope handle and the soil above the box lid. I can't see any indication that anything has opened the box or even found the rope. I squat down between the stones. Exactly like somebody would if they had noticed two unusually white rocks set up by the roadside. I was smart enough to not place the emergency box right in the middle, for exactly this reason. I look down the slope, and see that for an eye trained to look for such things, the escape route is clear. I slowly walk toward it, eyes scanning the ground before me.

I find it. A single, partial footprint. Just the impression of a toe. It's the kind of print left by somebody trained to move through woods quietly. To do that, you probe gently with the toe for any leaves or branches that might make noise before fully setting the foot down and shifting your weight onto it. But every so often, you overbalance a bit, or your other foot shifts unexpectedly, and the careful toe stomps down.

Somebody who is very good at hunting has been on the land.

I keep on walking, to the edge of the escape run. I stand for a minute taking it in. No vampire has gone down the run. So whoever was up there is either not a vampire, had turned back before taking the run, or had gone around it. I double check the land for a hundred yards on either side of the run, still finding no evidence a vampire has passed.

I don't want to think about it, but there is one person who might be probing our hideout. I don't want to admit to myself who I think it is. I recall the other sense I've had regarding Ivy, a thrope halfway transformed, limbs broken and arranged to tell me that he is leading them closer to Ivy. This incursion, though, doesn't feel like it's tied to that earlier sense. If the partial footprint I found did truly belong to the one I don't want it to belong to, I'm sure I'd be remembering the sense more strongly than I do. But that memory is fading. I hope it means that danger is passing.

All of this leaves me terribly worried about Ivy. The worry that someone might find us, coupled with what my sense has shown drives me to return to the cabin, to make sure she is still well. I carefully detour around the space shown me in my sense, not wanting to freshly agitate myself before getting to the cabin. Once inside, I silently pad my way to the bedroom and look in on her. She's curled up on her right side, one hand under her cheek, her long, dark hair braided up for sleep. It's warm enough in the room now, even with the wood burned down to just glowing coals,

that she's let the blanket slip down from her shoulder. I want to sit on the bed beside her, but I can tell she's wandered into a lighter sleep, and would likely wake up if I did so. Even though we've settled into a good rhythm in our days out here, I know that she worries constantly about her grandmother, and misses her friends terribly. It weighs on her constantly when she is awake. It is only when she sleeps that she stops worrying about them, and even then, I'm sure they are still in her dreams.

I can only hope that in her dreams they are happy and not apart.

Instead of disturbing her sleep, I sit down on my bed to watch over her. I listen to the light wind outside the cabin, the constant chatter of the night insects, the occasional pop or crackle of the coals in the fireplace. Somewhere in there, Carl's words come to me, the last conversation we had together when he demanded I forget about Ivy and leave Stokers Mill.

There are only three outcomes for a relationship between a vampire and one of the warm. The vampire turns his lover. The vampire remains beside them remaining forever young while they age and fade. The vampire leaves them when the can no longer hide what they are.

None of these outcomes is good for the lover. I was honest with Ivy when I told her my cold life is not a good one. The wars between the clans, the wars within the clans, the constant weight of the ennui that grows heavier year by year. Knowing what I do now, I wish that Sonia Vătafu had just drained me and left me to die that night. I would have been spared that year on the western front, and the following century of darkness.

I put my hand on my chest, to feel the slow beating of my heart. Usually, I go for days between feedings, days without having a pulse. Since I've come to the cabin, I feed a little bit every day so I have some warmth and a heartbeat for the woman sleeping in front of me. In the darkness, I can see one of her veins gently pulsing, a constant reminder that she is warm

and alive. I breathe in, and I can smell her. Under the plain soap I keep at the cabin is still that undeniable essence of Ivy. I remember kissing her, losing myself in her scent and the moment. I cannot drink wine, but in those moments when I brush my lips against her neck, I am drunk on something much finer.

How could I take all of that away from her? Her warmth and her heartbeat and her beauty and her scent? How could I even let myself think of inflicting my curse upon her? The only reason to turn her would be to have her forever, to make her mine, my possession, my property. To trap her with me.

No. Ben Wake loves Ivy Sparks too much to treat her that way. The only way to love her in the way she deserves, to thank her for warming this old vampire's cold heart, is to simply let her live.

It is only when Ivy shifts and pulls the blankets up again, that I stir. I go outside for a couple of fresh logs to put on the fire for her, and go back to my endless walking up and down the slopes. Much like Ivy the stress we've been under while hiding out had dampened my physical desire for her, but I suddenly find myself constantly distracted by thoughts of her body again. In the bedroom when she had let the covers fall, I could see the upper curve of her breast, rising and falling as she breathed. With her hair braided, I could see that little, delicious erogenous zone behind her ear that sends a shudder all the way down her spine.

I find myself constantly struggling to keep my thoughts on the mystery of who had approached our escape route. I have to keep focusing my thoughts to the task of looking for more footprints or any other sign that anything had been disturbed.

The arrival of dawn is actually a great relief, because I can finally excuse myself from trying to focus on the woods to go back to the cabin

and make Ivy's breakfast for her. I first get the coffee going, then start assembling what I can from the assorted dried goods and whatever fresh greens she foraged up the day before. Almost on cue, she comes out of the bedroom as I'm setting out her plate. It's still dreary and gray, drizzling lightly, so we sit at the small kitchen table instead of on camp chairs outside the cabin.

"Did you sleep well?" I ask, putting creamer in her coffee, and handing her the mug. I kiss the top of her head. She reaches back and strokes my cheek as I do so. A very familiar stirring happens just a little bit below my belt. I rest my hand on her shoulder, and am tempted to slip it inside the neck of her sweatshirt, but I don't. She takes a moment to enjoy my touch, but doesn't quite turn to make it easy for me to take it to a more personal part of her body.

"I did," she says. "Thank you for keeping the fire going all night for me."

"You noticed?" I ask.

"I was up a few times during the night. Including once while you were sitting on your bed."

I must have been very deep in thought then, because I never noticed her wake up.

"I don't know how I was able to tell. I certainly didn't see you. I just knew you were in the room. I actually liked it that you were there. You seemed very at peace with something, and I didn't want to disturb that."

This sets me to a new line of thought. It's not known for the warm to be able to pick up on the thoughts or emotions of vampires. Two vampires that are closely linked to each other somehow, as when one has turned the other, can do it. But I've never heard of a vampire being able to broadcast an

emotion to a mortal. I wonder if it is the love that I feel for her that she can feel.

I realize I am still standing behind her with my arm on her shoulder. I start to step away to go sit at the table, when she puts her hand on mine, holding me still.

“I love you, Ben,” she says, and I see a little glint in her eye that I have not seen since I was driving her home from the Harker’s Pass Inn, two weeks ago. “You didn’t move that bag with my little gift in it, did you?” she asks. “I might want to get a proper look at it tonight when I get ready for bed.”

Oh, Ivy. What you are doing to me right now!

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ivy Sparks

I really appreciate how respectful Ben is. These past two weeks have been hard on both of us, and I'm sure that it has been even more rough on him that I really haven't had any physical desire for him during most of that time. I mean, I feel like my body has betrayed me by shutting that down so soon after discovering how glorious it can be. Whenever I do think about a man's touch, I am as likely to picture Carl's primal masculinity, or the heat of Nathan.

At the same time, Ben has been different as well. I've been near boys that have wanted a lot more than I'm interested, and they act a lot different than Ben has while we've been out here. There's a part of me that fears, from time to time, if our attraction for each other had been the unknown, and once we got around to knowing it the mystery vanished and we've both lost interest. Those seem to be the darkest moments, though, when I find myself doubting everything. The thing is that our one night (and morning!) together surpassed anything I ever imagined sex could be, and there is still plenty of mystery still to be explored. 'Maybe not with just Ben,' rises the unbidden thought.

Sitting here, with food and coffee Ben has made for me, but can't share, I think that most of my changed mood really comes down to one

single word.

Vampire.

At first, I had to doubt him. Even with the things Grandma has taught me, the idea that my new boyfriend is such a creature? Not knowing that I'm a witch, how crazy would he have to be to make that claim to someone he thinks is just a young woman, clueless about the other things that live in this world? However, he had given me just enough proof that morning after that I was willing to believe it for a while, and since then, there really is no doubt that he is what he says he is. I have seen the things he can do. I remember the third day we were out here, when I felt how his body was nearly corpse-cold and his pulse was just one or two beats a minute. I've seen the fangs come out and go back in.

For all Grandma had warned me to steer well wide of any vampire I might ever meet, I have managed to fall in love with one. How do you love something like that? How do you open your body to it?

Well, as I'm sitting in a small cabin, with food he has made for me that he can't eat, with coffee he has made for me that he can't drink, with his ankle gently touching mine under the table, remembering the thousand kindnesses he has shown me since we've met, and the countless times he has shown me what I mean to him, I can answer that question now.

I do not love a vampire, and I never opened my body to one.

I love a man named Ben Wake. The person that is inside the body is what is important. I did not simply open my body to his body. When I walked into that hotel room with him, and he entered me, I opened myself to him.

I realize that I've been sitting there, with my fork just an inch from my mouth for a long time as my mind has wandered. I think Ben knows where my mind has been for the past few minutes, judging by the smile on my

face. I am very, very curious to see exactly what that little sexy something he bought for me is, to see how it looks on my body.

That's when I realize there are no mirrors in the cabin. Not a single one. I have a small one in my purse, in my makeup compact, but there's no way I'd be able to get a proper look at my entire body with it. This sends a sudden little electric jolt down my body. I never had any reason to think this before, but the lack of mirrors means Ben will be able to see my body in a way that I won't be able to. I'll never know exactly what that outfit looks like on me. Nobody in the world except Ben ever will. That image will be for his eyes alone. At this moment, I think I'm just one more dirty little thought away from dragging him to the bedroom.

He puts a hand on mine, squeezing it a little bit. "Finish your breakfast," he says. "I have some things I need to show you."

I raise an eyebrow at him, give him my most come-hither smile.

"Not that, Dearest Ivy," he says. "Not yet, at least. Let's save that for tonight, shall we?"

"Do we have to?" I ask.

"Yes and no," Ben says.

"How so?"

"The rain has just stopped, so it's the perfect moment for me to take you around the property and let you know how to tell if another vampire has been here. That's the yes we have to part."

"It can't wait?" I ask him.

"It can," Ben says. "But now is the ideal time for me to show it to you. It will leave you better prepared than if we put it off long enough for us to do a proper job of making love again."

"Responsibility," I say.

“Yes,” Ben says. “And the no, we don’t have to part. Anticipation, my love. Sometimes it’s fun to have to wait for it.”

“We’ve been waiting for it to come back for days. Both of us.”

“Yes. But now that it’s here and the fire is lit, let’s play for a bit, shall we?”

“I don’t think I like that idea,” I say, smiling at Ben.

“I know. That’s why I’m doing it to you,” he says, very clearly teasing me.

Our first time was something spontaneous, something I thought would come much later, until I was offered it right then and there. Maybe he’s right. Maybe some honest anticipation will make it even more fun. I am willing to play along. For a while.

Ten minutes later, breakfast is done and we’re walking out to what Ben calls our inner perimeter. It’s a box about halfway to the property lines to the sides, and about a quarter mile up and downslope from the cabin. “There are sweet spots where you can come up and not be easily seen from the cabin, but the way is clear enough that you won’t make much noise, disturb any trees or bushes, things like that.”

“Just like our escape routes?”

“Exactly like them. And remember, the hunter that was closing in on your house was one of my students. I taught her everything she knows. She’s going to look for spots exactly like this one,” he says, pointing to a gap between a couple of trees. There’s a game trail running through it. “Or that one.” He points to another place that is less clearly a good approach, but as I think about it, I see his wisdom. He walks me up the hill, pointing to places where one who wanted to sneak up on the cabin would cross our inner perimeter.

“Thing is,” Ben says. “I never taught any of my students everything I knew. I learned very quickly to never, ever fully trust another vampire. Never.”

The conviction with which he says this unsettles me a little bit. Is he warning me away from ever fully trusting him?

“I’ve told you about the clan wars and our constant conflicts with each other. At any moment, a vampire might change their allegiance, or be maneuvered into a position where it’s either kill you, or be killed. So, I’ve always reserved a few tricks for myself alone. What I’m about to share with you, nobody else knows.”

I see a sudden vulnerability in him. It’s almost as if this secret is something he’s held closer to him than the secret that he is a vampire. I nod to let him know I understand the gravity of the situation.

“What I’ve done all along the inner perimeter is find all of these places a vampire would normally look to approach from. I’ve identified every single one of them.” We walk back from the perimeter and he crouches down. Ben points out two of those sweet spots. “There and there. Can you spot the difference between them?”

I spend some time looking at where he’s pointing, but can’t find anything obvious.

“You remember there are silver bullets in the emergency guns, right?” he asks me.

“Yes.”

“Silver is very toxic to us. Deadly. So what I’ve done is seed most of these sweet spots with silver iodide. It’s a metallic salt, used to be used to make camera film, because it is very sensitive to light.”

“Like you are?” Ivy asks.

“Yes. That energetic sensitivity to light is similar to ours. I could spend weeks explaining the laws of sympathy and antipathy to you and you’d still only barely understand it, but it’s that same sensitivity to light we share that makes silver so toxic to us.”

If only he know how well I am versed in those laws. If he weren’t so old, I’m sure I could teach him a few things about sympathetic and antipathic magic, about apotropaism… Still, I think a bit about what he’s said. “So most of the easy routes are now poisonous for a vampire to pass through?” I ask.

“Not quite. The amount of silver iodide I’d need to make the ground actively poisonous to a vampire would literally cost me millions of dollars. But we can feel the threat. When a vampire comes up and is looking for a safe approach to a target, they are thinking exactly that – safety. They will be able to feel the presence of the silver on the ground, though, and that makes the approach they’re eying seem somehow unsafe. They’ll look elsewhere, see a few more approaches that also don’t seem like a good idea. Then, there’s that one approach.” Ben points to the leftmost of the two spots he had me looking at. “There’s no little, quiet sense of dread there. That’s the route they’ll take.”

“Hmmm,” I say. “Clever.”

“Thank you.” Ben stands up and offers me his hand. I take it and he lifts me up to stand beside him. Neither of us lets go of the other as we walk to the safe passage, the one without the silver. We come up to a clear spot between two trees. “Look there,” he points to a spot on one of the trees, about six feet up. A strip of bark about a foot long and two inches wide has been peeled away. “There are ten of these spots along the perimeter. I’ll walk you along and show you all of them, so you’re familiar with them.”

He finally lets go of my hand to walk over to the clear spot and take a knee. My hand feels so chilly, without the touch of his hand, as cold is it is. “If I ever have to go somewhere for more than a couple of hours, I want you to know these spots, and come visit them a few times every day. Here is where you’ll find a snapped branch, or a crushed plant, or a footprint, if a hunter will leave any,” Ben says.

I follow his eyes as he takes his hand and draws it side-to-side, like I should notice something in a straight line. I get closer, and instead of focusing my eyes on the ground in front of him, I focus right where his hand is.

A strand of spider silk crossing the path, with tiny dots of water on it. Now that I know what I’m looking for, I can pick out the full web, very lightly misted. Stepping back, it doesn’t take me long to find the spider itself, looking like it’s hovering in midair as it rests in the center of its fine web. “Stepping carefully so you don’t leave a trace is easy if you practice it enough,” Ben says. “These fine ladies will give you away every time.”

I’ve spent the last several minutes watching Ben move through the woods as if he was born to them, seeing how he lets himself sink into them, find their secrets, the little things most people never, ever notice. It’s like watching a dancer completely surrender themselves to the music. This is the Ben I fell in love with, right in front of me, his eyes focused on the sublime beauty of spider silk decorated by a million miniscule drops of water. This Ben is much more alive than he ever gives himself credit for, and it makes it so easy for me to forget he is a vampire.

I lean in real close to him. The foolish boy thinks I’m coming up to look closer at what he is seeing. I bring my lips right up to his ear, almost close enough to kiss his earlobe. “This fine lady thinks you should leave that fine lady alone for a while.” Ben starts to turn his head, and my lips are

on his. I press into him, not enough to unbalance myself, but more than enough to push him toward the tipping point. As he starts to return my kiss, he shifts the position of his legs and puts a hand behind him so he can gracefully lower himself to the ground.

I follow him down, straddling him in a luscious mirror of our first time together, when I lay on my back while he straddled me. Now, I am the one on top of him. I get to choose whether our lips touch or not. It takes no time at all for me to feel the rush of power that comes from this. I kiss him deeply, to the point where I'm almost afraid our lips will bruise if I keep it up to long. Then I pull back and feel him try to follow, his greedy mouth and tongue not wanting to lose contact with me. But the truth is, I can raise myself up farther than he can follow, especially since I have one hand on either of his shoulders, holding him down.

The way he breathes during those breaks, deep and fast when I first break contact, slowing as I keep myself out of his reach, but not becoming any shallower. Every time I do it, it seems like it takes him a second to refocus his eyes on me again. I didn't think it would be possible to be even more turned on than I was the night he was atop me, teasing me this exact same way, but something about the reversal of our roles unleashes a whole new level of passion with me. I roll back on my hips, so I'm kneeling with my torso upright, and I settle my weight down on him, right at that part of his body that is very obviously dying to be inside of me. I wriggle my hips to leave him in no doubt how close he is to what he wants, if only it weren't for the fact we're both still dressed.

Now that we've had sex once, I feel incredibly bold with this surge of desire that is tearing through both of us. Grandma had promised to teach me about a certain set of arts once I found a need for them, a proper partner to practice them with. I hadn't had any true interest then, but because I am

always curious, I'd found some of her materials and read through them. Now, I am putting that little bit of book learning to practical use. Nothing that I haven't been taught before, but I've never before had a desire to use those skills for this purpose. Little things, like highlighting different parts of my scent, forcing an eye to look where I want it to look, sending little jolts of fire or ice through my touch…

My hands go to my hips and grab the hems of my hoodie, the sweater under it, and the t-shirt beneath that, and I take them off all at once. The cold, damp air on my suddenly bare skin only serves to arouse me more as the chill makes my flesh tingle. Beneath me, Ben peels off his own jacket and shirts, opening his arms to receive me again.

I make him wait, while I run my fingers along my bra straps. I slide them off of my shoulders and barely start to pull at the cups, a little hint that I might reveal my breasts, or I might not. Ben's hands move to my hips, sliding up the sides of my body. He lightly scratches the skin with his nails as he lets his touch wander up to the band of my bra.

I keep my hips in motion, enjoying the pressure against that really sensitive part of me. The building pleasure there starts to spread through my whole body. My breath starts to shudder as I inhale, and sometimes I'll briefly hit this angle against Ben's stiff body that makes my eyes lose focus and all of my muscles tense up. Which one of us is using magic, I wonder then? I feel one of his hands start to reach around me, going for the clasp on my bra, and I pull myself back out of his reach.

A couple of breaths to compose myself, and I remember that I had been the one teasing him, the one casting the spell. "You want these?" I ask, pulling my shoulders all the way back to lift my breasts.

"Please…" Ben says.

I never suspected a single word could do to my body what a touch does, but it sends a shockwave from my ears all the way down to that aching place between my legs, and I go weak for a second.

“What did you say?” I ask, anticipation building within me.

“Please?”

The lightning shoots through me again. I reach behind myself and unclasp the bra, tossing it aside. I lean forward twisting slightly as I do to bring my right nipple to his mouth. He hungrily brings his lips and tongue up to greet it, one hand caressing the side of the breast while he alternates between flicking the nipple with his tongue and sucking gently on it. All the while, his hips are in motion, matching the rhythm of my own. My right arm gets tired, so I shift to put more weight over onto my left, which also pulls my breast away from his mouth. Fortunately for both of us, the other one is suddenly in exactly the right place for him to tend to it.

I ride a growing wave of pleasure until I swear I’m about to burst with anticipation. I know that Ben is in the same state, judging by how he’s now got a hand at the small of my back, forcing our hips together while we writhe against each other. I take one of my hands and start to unbuckle his belt, when Ben gives me a very clear reminder that he knows how to fight, suddenly rolling on top of me and pinning me to the ground. He’s got this huge smile on his face, though.

“Remember how we’re working on desensitizing you to a vampire’s ability to compel you?”

My mind goes right back to our conversation over breakfast, about me wearing my new lingerie to bed, about playing with anticipation.

“Don’t you dare!” I say, but I can’t help but smile myself. I both don’t and do want him to do it. I want so badly to get the rest of our clothing off and to make love to him on the soft, cold, wet ground right where we are,

but I also want so badly to surrender all of that control I've just been exercising to him. The thought of him making me wait against my will. With anybody but Ben, that thought would horrify me, but because Ben is mine, and I trust him fully, the idea only serves to arouse me even more than I really am.

"May I?" he asks.

I know I'm going to hate myself for the next few hours, but I can see it in his eyes how much he wants to play this game with me. I nod.

"Put your clothes back on so I can show you the rest of the perimeter, and we can continue this tonight," he says.

"You are in so much trouble when the sun goes down," I say. The desensitization must be setting in, because the last few times I had him compel me, I didn't have the will to talk back. Still, I notice that I'm already straining to reach for my bra.

"I'm planning on it," Ben says, kissing me one last time before he lets me up.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nathan Marsh

Now that I have been on the hunter's motorcycle, I have developed a stronger sense of her. She loves that machine, so being on it and riding it hard, like it was meant to be ridden, gives me insights into her, having some sort of shared experience with her now. Not that I can predict her actions or will be able to read her thoughts, but I will now continually orbit around her, coming ever closer if I wish. Our paths will continue to cross, just glancingly at first, but we will both find ourselves face to face with each other again, whether we wish it or not.

While I am flying high above the mountains, having set my body partially translucent since that is all the concealment I need against the twilight sky, I see what I presume is her burglar's car heading down the highway I had just driven down. She is not in it with him.

Of course, I had hoped that stealing the motorcycle would get her to leave Carl's property as well, but I must admit, she is quite the focused creature.

As I approach Carl's house, it is clear she is still watching it from the woods. Even if I manage to get her away from the house now, she has been here long enough that her scent will linger in the tree line, right where Carl walks just about every day. Carl's wolf is running perilously close to the

surface right now, so his sense of smell is going to be unusually acute in his human shape.

Not only that, there is no way Carl will not notice the smell of a strange person having been inside of his house. Even if the person had done everything they could to mask their scent, a lycanthrope can pick up on astoundingly subtle olfactory hints. I would be surprised if Carl makes it more than three steps inside his door before he picks it up.

She is too good to not have accounted for this. Either she has some means of clearing the invader's scent from Carl's house, or she feels she can gain some advantage to him knowing somebody was there. I resume full invisibility, and move closer to the hunter, perched up in a tree about ten yards from the fence line. I give myself another really good look at her. She is wearing a camouflaged jacket and pants, and has a Bluetooth earpiece in. Around her neck are the binoculars the imp guarding Emily's property had seen, and there is an extra set of lenses clearly attached to it. She does not look any different than on our first encounter, but I am not interested in her facial features right now. I know her presence, I no longer need to bother myself with what she looks like.

Instead, I am watching her behavior. She constantly switches between looking at the house through her binoculars, and scanning with her vampiric senses. Even without her associate inside, she is putting an intensive study into the property. While I am there, she gets a call. She has a very quick and terse conversation in English that is clearly about the remains of her motorcycle. The hunter is clearly very upset, but holds her composure, while she tells her caller to meet her a little bit down the road from Carl's and take her back to a hotel. She glances at her watch, continues to keep an eye on the place for another forty minutes, and then finally gives up her perch. As soon as she drops down to the ground, she reaches into her jacket

and pulls out a small spray bottle. A couple of quick pumps, and the air is filled with the stench of skunk, strong enough to even cover over her own scent. I do not know how this will help hide the fact that a mortal has been in Carl's house, but at least it hides definitive proof that she was out here for an extended time.

As she walks through the woods, taking a concealed path toward the highway, she places a call. I dare not creep close enough to try and use my acute hearing to pick up what is being said into her earpiece. Even invisible, there is too much risk she would feel my presence. But I can at least pick up her half of the conversation.

I can tell immediately she is in touch with somebody in the Negre clan as she speaks Romanian, with a certain amount of deference. She is not talking to Papa Racoviță himself – she is nowhere near deferent enough to be speaking to him, or even one of his higher lieutenants, but whomever it is, she respects and fears them. While she walks, I am able to discern that she had intended on interrogating Carl, and then quietly getting rid of him. Even though my theft of her motorcycle did not get her to completely abandon his property, it at least saved his life, as she realized that both times she has been near Carl's house, something has happened to the bike. The vampire she is speaking to seems to agree that Carl should be watched, but left unmolested until she can figure out exactly who is watching over and helping him. At no point does she imply she suspects it is my involvement. She does briefly consider it is Ben who is aiding Carl, as she has seen the two men speaking together, but she does not see how he could have come out of hiding and gotten close enough to her to take her bike without being detected. And she does use Ben's name, confirming that she knows who it is she is after. To take him would bring her an immense amount of prestige within the Clan and I can tell she is doing her best to

convince the vampire on the other end that she has everything under control and does not need assistance. She wants the glory and accolades all to herself, clearly.

No mention of Ivy in the call. I am hopeful that this means she had not gotten close enough to Ivy or to her home to pick up on the young woman's specialness. If anything, this means that if the hunter starts closing in on Ben, getting Ivy away from him and making sure Ben is not taken alive is what I need to do.

With this information in hand, I leave her to meet up with her companion, and return to Carl's house. I let myself in, and make a quick inventory. It is not my home, so I would not have his intuitive grasp of things being out of place. At least the intruder did not ransack the place. He seems to have been careful to not needlessly disrupt anything, though. I can still smell him a bit, so as soon as Carl gets here, he will know it right away. There is no art I have that will remove the scent of a mortal from the place. Even if I were to summon up an army of imps to clean like mad, to remove the person's scent would replace it with the scent of intensive cleaning. I get the sense that now that the hunter has decided to give up on Carl for the time being, that not letting him know she was here would be best. His temper is so short lately, I do not want anything to set him off needlessly.

I go get my car, and park right across the street and wait. As his car pulls up, I step out to greet him.

"What brings you out here, Nathan?" he asks me. He seems a little calmer than he did the last time I saw him. The edge seems to be off his temper a bit.

"I wanted to know if you have learned anything new about Ivy," I say. "Worrying about her has been keeping me up, so I decided to come up here and see you."

“Nothing,” he says, immediately, too quickly.

I just smile at him, to let him know that I know he is lying.

“Nothing Grandma will let me tell anybody,” he says.

I can tell that is a layered lie. First, he has learned something new. And while Emily would not want him to tell anybody else what that is, he knows better than to tell her even. He has been very busy while he was out from under Emily’s monitoring. I am certain, as I watch him try not to look me in the eye that he thinks he knows where she is.

“I know a lot more than you would ever suspect,” I tell him. He has long since figured out that I know he is a lycanthrope, but he has never learned my secret. Now seems like a good time to remind him. “You know there are dangerous things out there looking for Ben, maybe even trying to find him through you. With that in mind, please tell me you were not out looking for him tonight.”

“I can assure you I wasn’t followed,” Carl says. “I am very skilled at that.”

I opt not to mention that Emily told me about her being able to track his movements, up until earlier today. “You still have knowledge that could be extracted from you, my friend. You know what you are facing, and how good they are at doing that.”

I can tell that I may have pushed him a bit too far with that. “What am I facing?” he asks me, stepping closer. Yes, I have prodded the wolf now. Time for me to back down. Share a little bit of something he already knows, but act as if I don’t know that.

“Ben isn’t the only zombie in town,” I say. I am loathe to use the slur to refer to Ben, but using Carl’s slang can make me seem a little more companionable, a little more on his side.

“I know. We’ve kind of crossed paths already.” He tells me about when she got near his car the day he confronted Ben. I know all of this, but letting him tell the tale seems to calm him, makes him feel more in control of the situation at hand.

“Just, please be careful,” I tell him. “Please.”

Carl considers this, nods, and backs down.

“I need some sleep,” he says.

I can tell he is in a fight with the wolf, but that he temporarily has control. For at least the next day or so, he should be able to keep from transforming, and will choose not to unleash it to hunt. Right now, he needs to prove to himself that he can keep the wolf calm, and he has the willpower to follow through, for now.

As long as he doesn’t smell that there was an intruder in his house. I get a sudden idea. It will be a lot of work on my part, but it is better than having him fly into a fury right in front of me, transform, and go out to rampage. I would be his first target, and things would not go well for him.

But my kind is exceptionally skilled at creating illusions. Not just visual or auditory ones, either. We can tamper with other senses. As he walks toward the door of his house, I lay an illusion or normality across his home, summoning up the unique notes of Carl’s house – his body, the food he favors, the fabrics of his furniture, the décor he keeps. I create a mirage for his nose, and steel myself for the true and profound boredom of keeping it up for the next eight hours until he leaves the house for school in the morning.

In the morning, as Carl wakes up and starts getting ready for school, I call Emily to fill her in on what I know so far. She is surprised and quite upset that Carl was able to slip free last night and go out. As we talk she raises the suspicion that he may be very close to finding Ivy, and that

shedding that uncertainty about where she is and how she is doing is what has given him a small amount of calm.

Together, though, we decide it is not going to last very long at all.

Part of why I am so much stronger than either Ben or Carl is that they are descended from my bloodline. More than three thousand years ago, some humans mated with demons. The unions usually produced no children. Some produced offspring that ran closer to their demonic parent, these children were the succubi and incubi. Some ran much closer to their human parents, which produced the occasional heroic mortal, the kinds we remember now in old tales – Gilgamesh, Hercules, Cu Chulainn. All of those children of mortal and demon were sterile, though. The children created no children, and thus the bloodlines of humans remained uncorrupted by our influence.

Until one woman bore twins from a liaison with a demon. One could not abide the sun, once he was weaned from his mother, he could not eat grain or fruit or even meat. The only thing he could survive on was living blood. The other child was a feisty, hairy young woman, short tempered and strong. Like all women, the moon affected her humors. When it was full, it drew great power from a very deep well, and she took on the form of a wolf and ran amok through the woods around the village. Their mother did her best to hide her children's oddities, separating the three of them farther and farther from the village, from any towns or other people, going high into the mountains to try and raise them.

When three people live in complete isolation from others, one of two things will happen. They will draw closer, raising each other up, combining their strengths to form a powerful union that nothing can shake. Or they will turn on each other. The slow resentment will build, silently. Hatred will whisper some dark commentary on every interaction. Distrust will grow,

suspicion, bitterness. This family took that path, and one night, the twins broke out into an incredible amount of violence against each other. Their mother did what any loving mother would do – for she did truly love her two children, the product of a night spent with a lover who showed her pleasures she had never imagined before, and had never come close to since. She stepped between them to try and stop their fighting.

They did stop their fighting, only long enough to tear her to shreds and devour her. When they were down to the last few bones, they looked at each other, blood and gore dripping from their mouths, faces slimy and dark from offal, eyes gone far past madness. Each blamed the death of their mother on the other, and they resumed their brawl with each other. The continued biting and tearing and rending at each other until the blood drinker saw his chance to flee. The wolf was fast, but it did not have hands and nimble fingers. It could run, but it could not climb. The blood drinker scaled up a tree, close to a cliff, and leapt over to it. By the time the wolf calmed enough to change back into her human form, and found the tree her brother had climbed, the cliff he had scaled, he had found a river to cross and she lost his scent.

For years, he hid, she hunted. He found that by giving his blood to others, they would become like him. She discovered that her bite could infect the blood of others, and they would become like her. The twins created their small armies of soldiers, sent them after each other, each trying to eliminate the other. It did not take long for both of the twins to be slain, but their descendants lived on. The blood drinkers never did gain the ability to reproduce, to have children of their own. They could only turn others by giving up their own blood. The wolves, though, could turn others either by the bite, or if two wolves mated, they could produce a pup.

Today, there are a few thousand of each scattered around the world, living secret lives and still carrying on the silly sibling squabble of their first ancestors.

The wolf bloodline is tolerable to us. The wolves are stronger and healthier than humans, more perceptive in many ways. Yes, they are very temperamental, but most have been raised to hunt and fight vampires. They are not born killers, and those that have been raised in isolation from the war with the vampires learn young to control their transformations, and to keep their higher functions intact when changed. The vampire line, however, is corrupt. Individuals like Ben who have learned to control their hunger and maintain their respect for mortals are by far the rare exception to the rule. The vampire blood carries tremendously dark potential in it, and coupled with immortality, almost all of them become irretrievably evil. This is why my kind usually kills vampires on sight. It was only the sense I got that Ben needed to live – much like the hunter pursuing him – that kept me from slaying him the second he set foot in Stokers Mill. If I had known then what I know now, that Ivy would fall in love with him, I would likely have done it anyway, and trusted the future to sort itself out.

But here I am. Ben lives, the hunter that is after him lives. I spend all night putting an illusory stink in Carl's house so he will live. All because Ivy is somehow tied up in the convergence of all of us.

As Carl leaves his house, I call Emily back. "I have something to bring you. Be a dear, and do not try to figure out what is in it. But get some into Carl's food the first chance you get. It will completely suppress the wolf for a few days."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Carl Wilson

Going out to look for Ivy and Ben was a mistake. A huge, huge mistake.

I thought it would quiet the wolf down, if I fed it just a little bit. Take some action instead of constant inaction. Fooling myself into thinking that if I know where they are, I can best distract the hunt for them in the opposite direction.

But the wolf has always been with me. I should know the wolf by now. Giving the wolf a little taste doesn't satisfy it for a while. It doesn't convince it to go lie down in a corner and rest.

A little taste is an appetizer for the wolf. It stimulates the hunger.

I constantly itch now. I swear that I spend every waking second hoping that nothing upsets me, because I'm so close to transforming.

"Hey, Carl," Kate says, sitting down next to me, just an inch away. I put an arm around her shoulders and pull her close, rest my cheek on the top of her head for a second. She wiggles, playfully bumps her shoulder against my chest and shakes her head slowly, side to side, stroking her hair against my beard. We both sit back upright, and I take my hand off of her shoulder. That has become our greeting lately, since our physical attraction

for each other has waned. It is a closer degree of friendship, maybe a placeholder to continue exploring a deeper connection someday. Most importantly, it is the only thing that really distracts me enough that I can stop worrying about the wolf for a couple of minutes.

Even if we never, ever go any farther with each other than these little companionable puppy-nuzzles, for the rest of my life, I will be in her debt for these small moments of peace she gives me every day. Even Kate notices the change in my posture and mood.

I see her mouth, “Get a room,” at me.

It’s been a couple of days since Ivy missed her big Honors Lit midterm. Nathan and Kate got into it with Grandma, but she somehow managed to convince them that she is well and that she trusts Ben. A lifetime of being the perfect student and perfect friend and perfect granddaughter just got to be too much for her all at once, and she just needs to get away for a while and not be perfect is the story she sold them. How she manages to do things like that, I’ll never know, but she somehow pulls it off.

The story has helped them move on from their intense anger and acute worry about Ivy into a more settled place. They very clearly miss her, and that colors their mood more than anything these days. The school is still holding an official story that Ivy is dealing with a family emergency out of state, and that it’s pure coincidence that Ben has just gone truant, but nobody else believes a word of it. They all know that Grandma is the only family Ivy has, and if she really were dealing with an emergency, she’s the type of girl that would still make a post online or get in touch with a friend every few days to reassure everybody that she was well. Kate and Nathan have been sharing out what Grandma has told them, and it seems the rest of the school is willing to accept that.

All of them – myself included, actually – have seen how hard Ivy has always worked at everything. We all admire her as somebody that is almost too good to be true. Brilliant, friendly, beautiful, compassionate, kind, strong. As I walk through the hallways at school, I see faces here and there that seem to envy what they think Ivy has done, just cast off all of their responsibility all at once and just run away for a while.

The difference between them and me is that I know that Ivy has not fled her responsibility. She's fled a danger that none of them could even imagine. If I were to stop and tell any of these students, her vampire boyfriend has dragged her off to the woods to hide and protect her from even worse vampires, not a one of them would believe me.

Classes end for the day. I hope to get a chance to talk with Kate for a little while, but she begs off because she needs to hurry to work. I really needed that time with her, because an afternoon of all of my classes being tiresome and tedious has me just about vibrating with stress. The wolf can feel me weakening, and it starts pushing harder. As much as I would like to take the wooded path up the hill to my house, I know I can't. Once I get away from pinkie eyes, out into places where I can smell the passage of possum, rabbits, and most tantalizingly, deer, the wolf is going to want to hunt. I haven't let him out to hunt since just before Ivy and Ben ran. One whiff of deer, and I won't be able to stop the change.

The long way up the valley wall it is, then. Four miles of switchbacks and narrow gravel shoulders. When I get up to my house, I'm tired from too many nights of the wolf raging in the cage inside the cell and the long walk. I'm tempted to just go inside and go to bed, but I'm not actually tired. I don't want to go to the cage, either.

I realize that there is one person I can rely on to calm me when I'm having a rough time. The woman that's been there for me since my fosters

abandoned me here in Stokers Mill a few years ago. The one person here in town that knows what I am and what I'm felling right now.

Twenty minutes later, I'm pulling into Grandma and Ivy's driveway. This time, she's not expecting me, so there is not truck maintenance going on that just happens to need an extra pair of hands. I walk in, and she's sitting in the den with an IM convo open on her laptop.

"Here for dinner?" she asks. "You know I always cook for three, whether I'm expecting you or not."

"I'd really like that," I say.

She gives me another look, this time studying my face. "Looks like you really need it," she says. "Tell you what. The stuff in the oven will make fine leftovers, and I've got a couple of steaks I was going to cook up tomorrow."

Rare steak. Grandma knows.

"Need any help?" I ask.

She actually shakes her finger at me, and says, "You know that you shouldn't eat raw meat while pink. You just sit right down until I've at least threatened it with a hot pan." The other thing Grandma does is very pointedly not offer me a beer. I appreciate both, because either one can cause my control to slip. I know Grandma loves me, but if I ever transformed in front of her because I've lost control, I don't doubt that she'd take care of herself.

While waiting for dinner to cook, I idly tap out one of the few melodies I know on Ivy's beautiful piano. Touching something that she has poured so much love into calms me a little bit. I know that my skill barely scratches the capabilities of the instrument, but in a way, touching something that Ivy creates such beauty out of brings me out of my immediate worries, and into memories of happier times, of all of the beautiful hours I've spent in this

very den listening to her practice. I can't help by remember sitting right where I am now, side by side with her while she looked at the ad for the piano. I pointed to the view out the bay windows, looking down over the majestic valley that Stokers Mill is nestled into. "Imagine what it will be like to sit here, and look up from your sheet music, and see this while you play?"

That moment might have been what convinced her to spend the money to buy it.

"Alright, Carl. Come and get it," Grandma calls from the kitchen, interrupting my reminiscence.

The smell of the steak is so intoxicating that I have to force myself to sit down, pick up the fork and knife, and actually cut it up before eating it.

"Still having a rough time?" Grandma asks.

I don't even have to answer her. She knows. She could tell the second I walked in the door.

"If you need to stay here tonight, you can," she says.

I shake my head. I want to keep eating, but force myself to put the fork down. "Too much risk to you," I say. "I can take better care of myself at home."

"That's not taking care of yourself, Carl. You're beating yourself up worse than you can heal. You're limping a bit, you're favoring your right arm, and I can tell by the way you're chewing that you've probably knocked out a couple of molars."

"Well, I'm not hurting anybody else."

She shakes her head. "Yeah, but you're getting close, and you know it. That's why you're here right now, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I say, and go back to my meal. It's sating my physical hunger, even if I can still feel the wolf pacing inside, snarling at the internal bars

I've put around it to cage it in. It seems a little quieter, though. Maybe the proper food for my state, plus being around a place with such good memories, and Grandma's calm nature are helping me turn the tide a bit.

"You really need to put Ivy out of your mind, not go out looking for them again," she tells me.

"I'm not."

"You have," she says. "I know you have."

"You don't know what I do with my time."

"Maybe I don't. Finish that, so we can go to the den and watch the sunset together," Grandma says. "If you want to stay the night then, you're welcome to, but if you want to go home afterwards, I won't stop you."

"Deal," I say, digging back into my food, not looking up until the plate is clean.

It's only after we've cleaned up the kitchen a bit and we're sitting in the den that I start to think about our conversation at dinner. Grandma seems unconcerned about being close to me when I've been struggling to hold back a transformation for days. She's casually sipping her beer as if I were just any kid from town. I've got a cold soda, ice cubes clinking in the glass every time I take a sip.

"You said you know that I've gone out hunting Ivy and Ben. How?"

"I agreed with you, that maybe I don't."

"Please don't mess with me," I say.

"You spent an awful lot of time driving up and down one section of road a few days ago, and have driven by twice since then."

"What?" I ask. There's no way she can know that. Unless… "You put a tracker on my car?" I ask.

Grandma shakes her head.

“You need to stop it, Carl,” she says. “You told me about the sign Ben showed you. You know that you’re putting Ivy at risk by going out looking for them.”

“I can’t possibly be putting Ivy at risk by getting her away from him. There was another zombie out here sniffing around his place, not around here.”

“They’re looking for her,” Grandma says.

“How do you know that? Same way you know where I’m going? You got trackers on all the zombies in town, too?”

“I know,” she says.

I get up out of my seat and start pacing. I really want to just get into my car and leave, but the fact that Grandma is somehow monitoring it stops me. I’m furious at her for doing that to me.

“Is it even legal what you’ve done?” I ask.

“I haven’t done anything to your car,” she says.

I narrow my eyes at her. She seems to believe what she’s saying, but she’s not saying everything she knows.

“Carl, calm down. Just, let’s drop the subject and play some cards, and you stay here tonight, alright?”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” I shout. “I’m tired of being calm and pretending I don’t know anything when I know exactly where she is. I’m tired of just sitting around while that bloodsucker is out there feeding on her and doing who knows what to her, all because he made some second-rate gang sign at me. You know that I can’t stand inaction,” I say, getting up real close to her, just about up in her face.

“Look, I love Ivy as much as you do. And you know I’m not weak and I’m not stupid, Carl. If I thought going out after her would be the best thing

for her, you know I'd have done it. But right now, the safest place for her is with him. You've got to let it go, especially your jealousy about Ben."

That last bit gets even deeper under my skin. I have accepted that she will never love me romantically. That's not why her being out there with Ben bothers me now. It's because he's a vampire, not because he's Ivy's boyfriend and not me. "There's one thing you're pretty stupid about," I say.

"You're being stupid about everything," Grandma says. "You're an adult now, Carl. Stop using the wolf as an excuse to act like a child all the time."

"A child?" I ask. I start mentally composing a list of all of the adult things I'm doing – good job, good grades, taking care of my own home without parents – but I don't feel like arguing with her anymore. "I'm going home, because I'm even angrier now than when I got here."

I see her face soften, her voice becomes gentler. "Promise me you're going home, and I won't stop you," she says.

I stand there for a while, sniffing her out a bit. She seems willing to hold her end if I hold mine. She's still holding something in reserve on me. There's something she knows that I don't.

"Promise," I say. Whatever she's got on my car, she'll know if I go anywhere except home and stay there. I drop myself into the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition, but don't start it up quite yet. I find I'm surprised the wolf has managed to stay down through all of this.

I feel so trapped right now because I know that if I go out after Ben and Ivy, there's no way I'll be able to out-drive Grandma getting there, and apparently she knows, because of me, where they are. She truly believes Ivy is safe as long as I go nowhere near her, so if I try, she's going to stop me.

I take my phone out of my pocket and toss it into the cup holder, as I always do when I drive.

My phone. Long ago, Ivy and I had installed friend locaters on our phones so we could keep track at times when we were both busy and felt like we were constantly two ships passing in the night with each other. Ivy had left her phone behind when she ran off with Ben. The GPS on those things is really good these days. Mine can tell when I've changed lanes on the highway. I open the app, and zoom all the way in on the satellite view. Ivy's phone is turned on, and is not on the side of the house where her bedroom is.

An hour later, my phone is in my basement, right outside the cell, and I am standing between the two white stones I'd found along the highway. I park my car and get out.

"This is exactly what I needed," I say to myself, as I feel calmer than I have in a long time. The wolf is no longer howling to get out, no longer clawing at the bars of self-control I've caged it up with. Action. I'm taking action.

I see again the path that has been carefully cleared just enough to make it easier to pass through quickly and quietly, but not so much as to be obvious. I don't take it, but do stalk down the slope, parallel to it. Pretty soon, I pick up the scent of wood smoke. I try to bring up the wolf just a little bit to help me figure out the direction it's coming from, but it seems like it's actually drowsy. I've never felt that before, but choose not to dwell on it quite yet. I'm close. Step by step, I silently creep down the slope a little farther, until I catch sight of a little, warm glow. It flickers very slightly. As I get closer, I see that it is a window into a room with a fire burning inside.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ivy Sparks

While Ben sleeps through the height of the day, I take another tour around the perimeter that he'd shown me. Like almost everybody else I know, I've always been scared of spiders. Grandma always told me to not worry about big spiders in the house, because they got big by eating other insects. That didn't really comfort me in their presence. But going around the cabin and finding the branches Ben had bent to put them at just the right distance to attract the kinds of spiders that spin the big, nearly invisible webs, I have a newfound appreciation of them. Every spider I see is a place a vampire has not gotten near the cabin.

I'm even learning to admire their beauty. The ones Ben cultivates have long legs, and spread them out in pairs so they look almost like a letter X, in a striking combination of yellow and black. I kind of get why he calls them fine ladies.

I also take my time collecting more fresh greens. I want a really nice supper tonight. Even if Ben can't join me in eating it, it just feels right for our first time in a few days to make an effort to make it special. After all, he did buy me something pretty to wear. A little bit of searching of my own secret spots around the cabin brings me to a little patch of wild alfalfa I've

had my eye on. The plants have just gone into bloom, so I pluck a good handful of them. The flowers are sweet, and will be a nice balance for the bitter greens that I've been able to forage lately.

By evening, I'm getting good enough at walking the perimeter that I find all of Ben's vampire chutes, as I'm thinking of them now, without having to search. I start walking back to the cabin and catch the scent of something cooking. Inside, Ben has already set the table nice, including a little spray of wildflowers in a glass, and a candle burning. There's a bottle of wine as well. I guess I'm not the only one that thinks something a bit special is in order for tonight.

I kiss him as I slide in next to him at the small kitchen counter to wash my wild salad and toss it with some rice wine vinegar and olive oil that I insisted he pick up on his last run into town. I choose not to ask what exactly is cooking in the pot. Growing up with Grandma, I'm used to small game in my diet, but I'm still not completely comfortable knowing that Ben had fed on it first. I do appreciate that he did hunt a couple of hours ago, as he's nice and warm to the touch, now that the sun is behind the mountains and the air is cooling again.

As Ben reaches up for a bowl for my supper, I ask him, "Time for me to change?"

"Not yet," he says. "You'll be way too chilly if you do."

I can't argue his point there. He's already got a fire going in the living room, but we both know none of that heat ever makes it to the kitchen. If he had built a fire in the big wood burning stove, the kitchen would likely be plenty warm, but we've been using just a propane camp stove for all of our cooking.

After setting food out on the table for me, he puts a big pot of water onto the stove.

“Any chance of letting me take care of the dishes in the morning, instead of interrupting the flow of the evening?”

“It’s not for that. I figured you might want to wash up when you go to change.”

I nod my head. I hadn’t considered that yet. “Always looking out for my comfort,” I say.

“Always,” Ben says, sitting down across the table from me. He opens the bottle of wine, and I notice there are two glasses on the table. I want to ask what he’s doing, but he just holds up a finger to ask me to wait. He pours wine into one of the glasses, swirls it around the inside, and then pours it into the other glass, which he hands to me.

“A toast,” he says. “To the most beautiful woman in all of this valley.”

I smile, we clink glasses, and he breathes deep from his empty glass while I take a sip from mine. It’s pretty good stuff, but not quite up to some of the bottles Grandma brings home from her travels. About halfway through the meal, I interrupt the nice conversation we’re having, because I have to bring up something that’s been bothering me since morning.

“Ben. What you did to stop, well, what I’d started this morning. Don’t you ever do that to make me do something with you. Even as a joke, alright?”

I see a sudden look of concern come over his face. “I would never do that to you. Your body belongs to you and you alone.”

“Ok,” I say. “I’m sorry I had to bring it up.”

“No apology necessary, my love. It is a frightening power that I have, and you are right to fear it. Fortunately, I can’t use it that way.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“We cannot compel you to harm yourselves. To compel you to let me touch you or take you without your consent is to compel you to harm

yourself. It simply cannot be done." He reaches his hand across the table.

I take it in mine, and hold onto him for a couple of minutes. "Thank you," I say, when I let go so I can finish up the last few bites of my supper.

Ben takes the big pot of water on the stove and uses it to make me two pots of warm water. We carry them to the bedroom together and set them on a sideboard. "I'll have the living room set up for us," he says, stepping out and shutting the door behind him.

There are many things I have learned to embrace and even enjoy about our little cabin. One thing I will not miss is bathing out of pans. When we're done hiding out here, the first thing I'm going to do is take the longest and hottest shower in the history of water. Still, I manage to get myself nicely freshened up.

I finally open the ugly paper bag containing the lingerie Ben bought for me. It's a bodysuit made of a very soft and sheer fabric, with modest lace cupping my breasts and down between my legs. I look down at the front of it once it's on me, and I find I rather adore it. Ben is right, the soft green doesn't wash out my skin, and it hugs me just right to completely flatter my figure. I really wish I had a mirror, to see what it does for me from behind.

I briefly consider putting on the nicer of my sweaters to leave the bedroom to make Ben wait for it a little, but I decide to be bold, and just step out into the living room. He's got every spare blanket in the place spread out on the floor in front of the fireplace, which now has a proper fire burning in it. Every other light in the cabin is out, but he's left the curtains open, to let some of the last light of the day in. He smiles wide when he sees me, and fails to be subtle about giving me a once-over.

"Lovely," he says.

I pivot to show him the backside of it, slyly looking over my shoulder at him. The look on his face tells me the rear of the garment may flatter me

even more than the front. That and the fact that he can't get any words out. I spin to face him again and slowly walk toward him. I realize that a pair of heels would be the perfect accessory right now, but I settle for very deliberate steps, reaching out to point with my toe and set it careful, very obviously swinging my hips as I shift my weight between legs with each stride.

Ben doesn't move from where he's sitting in the middle of the blanket pile. I come down to my knees, straddling his thighs. "Were we somewhere close to here when you so rudely sent me away?" I ask as I close for a kiss.

Whatever fighting trick it was that Ben did this morning, he does again, and I'm suddenly beneath him once more. "I think we were here," he says.

"You're over dressed for this party."

Ben peels off his top, showing me the full glory of his strong abdominal muscles and solid chest. He rests his weight on me, and brings his lips to mine. I reach down for his belt and start tugging at the buckle.

"Not yet," he teases, pulling my hand away.

"You're still over dressed," I say, going for his belt with my other hand.

"Am I?"

"You are!" I say. I shove him off of me, and he lets me awkwardly roll up on top of him. "Off with these!" I say, opening his belt and tugging at his trousers. I unbutton the fly on his jeans, and he pushes them and his underwear down, lifting his hips up for me so I can tug them off.

From my new vantage point, between his feet, Ben is fully naked and exposed to me. If he were not as powerful and self-assured as he is, he might look vulnerable right now. As it is, with his muscular, lean body, his complete comfort with being unclothed, his very obvious arousal, he looks more delicious than anything. I drop to my hands and knees, and start to crawl up his body, dragging my lace-enveloped breast along his skin as I

go. It seems to slightly tingle his leg, as evidenced by a very slight shiver. It's when I get up to the top of his thighs and that wonderful flesh in between that his breathing catches. I take a deep breath in and bring my face very close to him, exhaling as I go, and kissing his belly just after I've passed it. I press my chest down against him, and feel him lift his hips up to meet me. He's clearly as eager to be inside of me again as I am hungry for him.

But he bought me this lovely thing to wear, and so I'm going to wear it for him. I kiss his belly again and again, planting a line of little, wet lip prints up to his chest. I crawl a little farther up, and now we're really close to where we were this morning. I'm up on top of him, my hands on his chest holding him down, teasing him with my mouth. I bring myself close so he can kiss me, let him start to enjoy it, wait for his breathing to slow as the kiss deepens. Then, I lift my upper body away from him. His lips chase mine, not wanting to break contact, but I hold him down. Sure, he could just flip me onto my back and take charge, but he seems to enjoy letting me play up here.

All the while, his hands move from my hips, up my side to my shoulders, and back down. Such strong hands, the fingers gripping me every time I pull away to tease. The entire time, his hips keep up this steady rhythm, not quite thrusting against me, but not really rolling either. Kind of rocking back and forth under me. Every time I let my awareness drift down between my legs, the thought that it's just a tiny bit of very thin fabric keeping us apart makes the muscles inside clench up. I can feel that part of my body begging me to remove that last impediment.

I just can't deny how powerful it feels, though, to have Ben beneath me, on his back, letting me take control. The first couple of times we made love, letting myself surrender to him brought me to such an exquisite space

of ecstasy. To just let his hand, his mouth, his body, his will guide me through one doorway after another of new pleasures was exactly perfect. I let him overwhelm me with the scent and taste of him, the feel of his skin on mine, the steady confidence with which he prepared me, opened me, and entered me.

But to have him now surrender to me, let me explore him, set the pace, the temperature. For Ben to offer himself up to me to experience as I will, to trust me to please myself in ways that will also please him. That is a new sensation, a new beauty, a new world that I had no reason to believe was so close to the other one he had introduced me to. Both are perfect.

I crawl a little farther up his body, and again, lower one of my breasts to Ben. He rubs his cheeks over the lace. The fabric has a little bit of tooth to it that gives me this strange, gently rough sensation, and shoots little sparks across my skin. I wriggle my shoulders which presses my breast up against his cheek. He giggles – he actually giggles! Then he opens his mouth and tongues my nipple through the lace. His hand takes hold of my other breast and very lightly kneads it. I've now got three very sensitive parts of my body being touched by Ben all at once. I'm suddenly very aware of just how lit up every single nerve in my body is, and as soon as I notice that, I find myself buried under an avalanche of pleasure as a massive climax bursts out of nowhere. Ben lifts his hips right up off the ground, and places his free hand on the small of my back to keep my hips pressed tight against his as I first grit my teeth at the intensity of it, then open my mouth and let out a full-throated moan. Several seconds pass, my whole body quivering on top of his, and I collapse onto him.

Ben's hands drift to meet between my shoulder blades. He slips the straps of the body suit down my arms, and pulls them even farther to free

my breasts. He embraces me, pushing our chests together, and I feel his heart pounding inside his chest, in synch with my own.

“Do you need me to take over?” he whispers into my ear.

I shake my head at him, and come back up to my hands and knees.

“Take it off,” I tell him.

He slowly drags the shoulder straps toward my hips, unpeeling the soft fabric from my body. He gets me stripped to my waist, then brings his hands up, slipping them inside the garment to push it down to my thighs, to my knees. One leg at a time, he frees me from my pale, green silken cocoon.

Once I’m completely undressed, I move a bit up his body to position myself, and reach down for him.

“You don’t need to,” he says. He puts one hand either hip and just moves me another couple inches farther up his body, and brings us together, belly to belly. His hips shift just a bit, and I feel some of his muscles tighten, as his hands gently guide me lower.

I feel him touch the entrance to my most secret place. Without conscious thought, my hips adjust a little bit, and he slips, effortlessly, inside of me. My eyes go wide and I gasp with pleasure as he fills me completely. Ben smiles a thousand miles wide, and with the tiniest of nudges, sets the two of us into motion. He finds this delicious angle that seems to hit every single sensitive spot in my body, which causes me to gasp again. Once he hears that sound escape my lips, his hands come around to my chest to rub my breasts and gently stroke my nipples.

Without him guiding my hips anymore, I am free to move as I will. I find that by painting a little figure-8 with my hips I get this amazing variety of sensations inside of me that bring me rapidly close to the edge, but refuses to push me over. I don’t mind, though. Ben seems content to lay

below me and let me learn him and me and us. But as much as I like dancing along the edge, it doesn't take long for my hips to develop a mind of their own. The sinuous snaking gives way to a gentle rock that seems to start at the base of my spine. The shift pulls me back from the edge at first, but then I discover I am on a slow path up. Step by step, I rock myself closer and closer. While this build is not as rapid, I can tell it is inevitably leading me ever higher.

As my second climax comes closer, I start to move ever faster, until I find a rhythm that seems to put every part of my being into perfect synchronicity. My breathing becomes more and more vocal. Ben's does, too, as I feel him stop holding himself back so he can join me. The sound of his voice, deep and slow as mine is high and desperate is the last push I need. "Oh, Ben!" I shout as my body tumbles onto his, and my soul bursts free in wave after wave of hot, white pleasure that shoots from the core of my being upwards and outwards. I feel his body clench beneath me, and his arms squeeze me tight, crushing our chests together, nearly taking the breath out of both of us.

It doesn't take long for the sweat on my body to start to cool. The fire in the fireplace had burned down to just coals. Ben pulls a couple layers of blanket on top of us to help keep us warm. We stay like that for a long time, until I feel myself about to fall asleep.

"Come on. To the bedroom, my dear," Ben says.

I reluctantly roll off of him and sit up. Just as the blankets fall off of my shoulders, baring me to the waist, we hear a bang from the porch. Ben sits bolt upright and looks out the window. The shock on his face gives way to confusion, then he narrows his eyes and shakes his head.

"What is it?" I ask. "Have they found us?"

Ben keeps his eyes fixed on the window, on something his eyes can see, but mine can't. We hear footsteps, as whoever is out there runs from the cabin.

"No," he says. "It's not hunters. It's not vampires." He takes a deep breath, frowning.

I wonder what could be troubling him so much.

"It was Carl."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ben Wake

“He’s gone. He’s off the property,” I tell Ivy.

“How do you know?” she asks me.

“I used to hunt thropes, remember? Having put eyes on him, and having the land set up the way I like it, I can tell. He’s outside the inner perimeter, and has probably kept on running.”

She gives me a doubting look, as if she thinks I’m being overconfident.

The thing is, there is a part of me that really hopes he is still on the land. If he is on the land, I know that the hunter I saw is not compelling information from him. Of course, I had trained that hunter. If she has associated him with me in any way, she is probably tracking him somehow. If the hunter shows up here with Carl on the land, it would be good to have a companion by my side to help take her down. The last time we spoke, despite the fact that we had some pretty sharp words for each other, we seemed to have come to an understanding with each other. We shared information to keep Ivy safe.

Of course, he is still a thrope, and has a hard time with his impulses which is why he did come out here and find us, despite knowing that it would put Ivy at risk. I know that it is only a matter of time before we are found out, though. And perhaps it would not be bad to have the hunter find me now. The longer she spends hunting me, the more Negre will converge

on the hunt, and the harder the fight will be when it inevitably comes. Which leaves me wishing that Carl were here, with the hunter hot on his trail. Deal with her now, and then Ivy and I can move on again.

“Wait,” Ivy says.

I suddenly realize the error I’ve just made.

“What did you just call Carl?” she asks.

“A thrope,” I say.

“A werewolf,” she says.

I see calculations happening behind her eyes. She seems surprisingly undisturbed by this revelation, as if finding out that her new boyfriend is a vampire makes it easier to absorb that one of her best friends is a lycanthrope.

“How long have you known?”

“It didn’t take long. He figured me out, I figured him out. We both seemed committed to keeping the Truce intact, so it seemed safer for me to stay in a small town with Carl than to start the process again of finding a new place to hide out from my clan. I figured that any town with a werewolf in it would not have an active vampire presence. It kept me safe, really.”

“And he did warn you of the other vampire in town. The hunter we’re hiding from right now.”

“He did,” I admit. “I owe Carl quite a bit, actually.”

“I owe him a lot. Starting with a huge apology for having blown up at him. I could have handled all of that much differently. I know I’m not the first girl in the world with two guy friends that were interested in her that managed to keep both of them.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it,” I tell her. “Emotions are tricky things. Unpredictable, even to ourselves. We can have all the best intentions in the

world, but when it comes right down to it, we'll feel what we feel in the moment. We can't control that."

"Yes, but we can control how we deal with those feelings. I was way too harsh on someone that has been right there for me, by my side, for years. All the nights he's been at the house while Grandma's been on the road, or making sure I get home all right on those roads in winter. I can't believe that I was willing to just throw it all away all at once just a few days ago."

"Let us focus on survival now," I tell her. "Live long enough for you to make things right with him."

She seems to accept that. Ivy stands up, keeping the blanket wrapped around her, and goes to the bedroom to start putting on clothes.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"We are going to walk the property together," she says. "Let's both get a good sense for what the place feels like right now, so we'll both have a better feel if something changes. If you're right, now that Carl has found us, that hunter may not be far behind."

"You should stay inside," I say, leaning a little bit of compulsion on her.

"No. We should go together," Ivy says, pulling on her pants.

"It's safer if I go on my own. It's after dark, so I and any vampire that might be on the land can see way better than you can. Just wait for me." This time, I put my full will into compelling her to obey.

Ivy quirks an eyebrow at me while she puts her bra on. "I'm going," she says. "You can come with me or stay. I don't care."

"What are you doing, Ivy?"

"You taught me how to resist your compulsion."

"It shouldn't be working this quickly," I say.

“I’m a very fast learner. Come on,” she says, pulling on her hoodie and walking toward the door.

I am tempted to stand in her way, but I don’t know that I really want to see what she does next. I had always known that Ivy was a very determined woman when she set her mind to something. It seems like today she has set her mind to being very active in the defense and care of our little piece of land here. I had noticed over the past few days as she was settling more into the routine of life out here that she has been becoming more herself. Right now, Ivy is really aglow with life. The assertiveness in flirting with me today, and in the love making we have just shared, her courage and willingness to step out and face whatever is out there. This is the Ivy I think I had truly fallen in love with, the large personality inside that body, capable, assured, confident.

If that hunter is out there, I know it will be a hard fight, and I’m going to have to keep Ivy safe. But I also find myself welcoming the idea of having her at my back. “Alright,” I say. “Let’s do this.” I go to the bedroom window and open up the false panel, handing her the short rifle inside. She takes it with a nod, and slings it over her shoulder, leaving her hands free.

When we step out onto the porch, she reaches beneath the edge of the deck, and pulls out what looks like one of our kitchen knives. Why she has it stashed there, I do now know, unless she felt at some point that she needed to have a weapon hidden somewhere outside of the house. But she knows about the need to use silvered weapons against vampires or thropes. What was she hoping to defend herself against with a simple kitchen knife, especially when there are several guns hidden inside?

I can’t waste too much concentration on that right now. I want to track Carl’s movements, make sure he is off the land, and make damn certain the hunter is not following him. The other thing perplexing me is that Carl kept

himself leashed when he saw Ivy and I naked on the floor together. It must have taken an amazing amount of self-control for him to do that.

As if she can read my thoughts, Ivy asks, “If Carl had attacked you. Which one of you would win?”

“Today, I don’t know,” I say, without hesitation. “If the Great War were still happening, Carl, without question.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Once the war ended, we both stopped training to fight each other. Carl is formidable, but I have simply been fighting longer. I’ve learned over time how to keep my skills sharp instead of letting them go dormant. So if we were to face each other right now, today, after many years of tenuous peace between us, who knows. His natural talent and the fact that he was trained since birth specifically to fight my kind would make it a hard fight. But there is the old saw that youth and skill are no match for old age and experience.”

“And if the war were still happening?” Ivy asks.

“Remember what I told you about my kind having a hard time learning and adapting. The unfortunate side effect of immortality? Carl, son of two werewolves, from a powerful bloodline, trained since birth, and having a lifespan barely longer than yours. He would keep learning, keep adapting, keep his style ever evolving. Plus, he knows he is going to die someday, whether by violence or not. That makes him, makes you, much less afraid of death than I am. That frees him up to fight with a boldness and courage that I don’t possess. Without the Truce, Carl would far be the superior warrior to me.”

“Either way,” Ivy says, very sadly, “if he had changed when he had seen us, I would have lost one of you tonight, wouldn’t I?”

“I would have done everything I could to avoid killing him, out of respect for your love for him, but not at the expense of my own life. All three of us are very fortunate that he did not transform.”

Ivy reaches a hand out to me. “Thank you for understanding what he still means to me.”

“You have recently realized just how much you have loved him, haven’t you?” I say. “Every time you’ve mentioned him over the past few days, there’s something about the way you talk about him.”

“Busted,” she says quietly.

“I am not offended,” I tell her. “Right up until I outed him just now, you may have been realizing that Carl could give you a relationship that I never could.”

“We should focus on what we’re out here for,” Ivy says.

I nod in agreement, and go to where I saw him run away, looking for footprints. Fortunately, since he was shocked by what he’d seen, and apparently wanted to go in a hurry, they are easy to find.

I point out the trail to Ivy. She crouches down beside me to look closer, picking carefully at the plants. She pulls a fresh shoot of something and puts it in her mouth, thoughtfully chewing on it.

“Let’s keep going,” she says, scanning slowly around her.

Slowly, we climb the slope of the mountain, toward the highway that runs above the cabin. She does a remarkable job of following Carl’s trail, even though I’m sure she can’t make it out with her eyes. Does she simply know Carl well enough to know how he would move through a wooded area? Or is she demonstrating some particular skill in moving around these mountains that she can tell the best route to take naturally?

No. Her ability to follow his trail is too uncanny, and she is using some sense, not intuition or experience in this environment to navigate. Soon, I

simply let her take the lead up the slope, while I keep my eyes open for the hunter, if she is here. Every time I look down at where Ivy is walking, she is still following Carl's flight from the cabin.

She is still holding the kitchen knife in her hand, point forward, but not in some naïve attempt to use it as a weapon or to intimidate with it. Her grasp on it is extremely light, so much so that the blade swings slowly, but freely, from side to side. She has carved symbols into the handle, and has wrapped cord around it in an elaborate braid. I had wondered what had happened to the necklace she usually wore, a reddish stone on a leather thong. Now I know where the cord went.

"I see Carl and I aren't the only ones with secrets," I tell her.

She glances over at me. I imagine her eyes have adjusted enough to the dark that she can see me looking at the knife.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she says, but she makes no attempt to hide the knife, or otherwise change her behavior.

"You're a witch, Ivy." It is very hard for me to get those words out. I don't want to have to admit what that means.

"Yes. Esseriya line. Only daughter of an only daughter, thirty-eight generations back."

"I had no idea," I say.

"Of course you didn't," Ivy says. "I had even forgotten the first few days we were out here. Everything had changed so fast on me, and the emotional whiplash of going from pure elation to utter panic within a couple of hours. It had me way outside of myself for longer than I would like to admit. When you started sleeping through the days is when I realized that I come from a very long line of women who survive and thrive, and I started practicing even harder than I did when I was at home. I guess that fear of death lit a fire under me that youth hadn't."

“This changes everything,” I say.

“It changes nothing,” Ivy says. She stops walking and stands up straight, squaring her shoulders at me. “I still love you after finding out what you are. Yes, I had to get used to it, but I chose to keep loving you while I figured it out. Me being a witch should be no different for you. There is no war between us, no conflict that we are caught up in.”

I shake my head. I don’t even know where to start trying to explain to her what her being a witch means for us, what it means for the sensing I’ve had about her. I now know exactly why she’s going to beg me to turn her. It is a horrible thing she’ll have to endure, and it is unknown whether or not I’ll be alive the following morning.

Of course, Ivy may not be the witch that Sonia Vătafu had foreseen, a vision she had right in front of me, just before I got sent back to France in 1942. The one that scared her so much that she took her own life shortly afterwards. Ivy may be just a witch that is in love with a vampire. But considering how few witches there are in the world, and how few vampires that have rebelled against their clan, and the timing is right, with the Negre not fighting the thropes at the moment.

“Ben!” Ivy snaps.

“Huh?”

“Why does this change everything?”

“Because it would be best for you to forget you know me. Go back to the cabin, and get anything you want to take home with you. I’ll confirm the hunter has not followed Carl, and we need to get away from each other.”

“Does me being a witch really require this much drama?” she asks. “Can’t you just accept that I am more than just a regular girl, like I have learned to accept that you’re not just another really cute and interesting guy?”

“It’s not that you’re a witch. Well, it is, actually. It is very dangerous for me to get involved with a witch. Both of us will suffer greatly for it unless we break things off here and now, and we get far away from each other.”

Ivy tucks the knife into her belt, and reaches out for me. I back away from her touch.

“You’re terrified, aren’t you?”

“I am not playing a game with you, Ivy. I’m not being dramatic. We have the potential to create something truly terrible, your lineage and my blood. Get what you need from the cabin, and let’s get you out of here.”

“Is this really it, Ben? One word, and that’s the end of us?”

I don’t know what else to say to her. I wish I could tell her all of what Sonia Vătafu had told me, but I don’t want to consider that I might be the vampire she spoke of. I could tell Ivy what will happen to her if Sonia Vătafu’s vision comes to pass, but it would be cruel to do so. Less cruel to color myself a coward and a cad in her eyes, and leave her weeping and ignorant of the fate she has narrowly avoided.

Ivy slaps me, snapping me back out of the dark thoughts I’ve lost myself in. “Is this it, Ben?”

“This is it,” I tell her. “I have learned to not ignore the future when I get glimpses of it. And knowing what I do about you, I can see a future I want no part of.”

“I can’t believe any of this,” Ivy says. “But if it’s what you want, I don’t need anything from the cabin. I came out here with just the clothes on my back, and I’ll leave with the same. You can even have this back,” she says, pulling out her makeshift ritual blade and throwing it on the ground between us. She unslings the rifle and tosses that down the hill. “Let’s go. Where’s your car?”

“I can compel someone to drive you home without harming you.”

“I can take care of myself,” she says, and starts stomping toward the highway. I start to follow her, but she turns and shoots me a fierce and hot glare. I wait for a moment, until she is too far away to see me with her warm eyes in the darkness, and I follow silently. I at least owe it to her to make sure she gets somewhere safe before I leave.

As she steps out of the treeline, I see a car parked by the side of the road. It’s Nathan.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Nathan Marsh

“So what’s your secret?” Ivy asks as soon as she recognizes me.

“I, my dear, am a demon. I have known your grandmother since she was your age, and made a small mistake in a summoning, bringing me instead of the minor invocate she was intending to call.”

“Hello, Nathan the Demon. I am Ivy the Witch. Are you going to need to cast me aside now that you know that?”

“I have known you were a witch longer than you have, and my path is ever by your side.”

“Well, my path leads to my bedroom. Take me there.”

“Let me see if it is safe to take you there,” I say, reaching for my phone as I start the car.

“Why wouldn’t it be safe?” Ivy asks.

“The hunter has been watching your house and Carl’s.”

“Home. Ben apparently is going to make enough of some sort of vampire ruckus to get her running after him. She can have him. They deserve each other.”

“Home it is then?”

“Please,” Ivy says. I put the car in gear and pull onto the highway. “I’m assuming you followed Carl out tonight?”

“Yes. Until this evening, I did not know where you and Ben were hiding out. He is good. Carl would not have found you, except that fate intended it to happen. We were driving home from Denver one night, along this very road, as Ben was coming up from the cabin to make a run into town.”

“I’m really sorry that I vanished on you all like that. I’m sure I worried everybody sick.”

“It was the worst for Kate,” I say. “Emily, Carl, and I. Like you, we all have our secrets, we knew this was all part of the things that happen to us because of that. Kate has no idea that there are things like us in the world. When things calm down, you should tend to your friendship with her, for it is the one that is most damaged.”

Ivy just nods at that. “How has Grandma been?”

“Worried, obviously. She did not like the idea of you being with Ben. She would have preferred either Carl or I, by far, but she was willing to let you live your life, until it became clear that Ben is a renegade Negre. That put you in tremendous danger, as a means of leverage against him. Even after you were claimed, and they can now no longer cause you physical harm as long as he lives, they could still cause you great suffering if they felt there was advantage in it. Even now, with Ben drawing them, you are not completely safe, and Emily and I will need to be extremely vigilant about everything for quite some time.”

“Well, if I knew how things would end up with Ben, I’d have tamped down my feelings for him long ago. Like, we had sex, then immediately I have to run for my life with him, then I get used to living in hiding, we have sex again, and an hour later he’s shoving me right out of his life.”

“To be fair, he was wise to take you into hiding with him when he first saw the hunter, and he is making the right choice to separate and draw them

away from you now. I believe he was always acting out of genuine affection for you."

"Well. I guess somebody's fate is incompatible with his affections. Though you mentioned fate and Carl as well. From what I know about fate, I suppose being his girlfriend wouldn't have done me any better would it? Are there a ton of stupid packs out there fighting each other that would love to go all big bad wolf on me?"

"The lycanthropes do not have the clan problems the vampires do. They are territorial in their own way, but if they are going to fight, they do it quick and clean."

"So, how many futures am I caught up in? I'm starting to feel like a pinball here."

"How many futures is a witch ever not caught up in?" I ask her. "You were born into power, and power will take you where it wants to."

"I'm really not in the mood for riddles or whatever right now. Straight answers would be lovely right about now."

"Emily knows that you and Carl will remain part of each other's lives, that there will be a reconciliation between you, and love."

Ivy looks over at me, nods, smiles a little. "That makes me feel good. Knowing that. My biggest regret, up until very recently, was the fight I got into him with over Ben. Oddly, even Ben was starting to warm to Carl, make sure I knew he was a good man. I think Ben really respects him deep down."

"He does," I say. "It took him a while to do so, and not completely because of the Great War. I think Carl and Ben have clashing personalities. They may learn to respect each other, but they will never actually like each other."

“Alright. Fate wants Carl and I to remain close. That’s good. What else?”

“Emily knows a lot that I will not let her tell me.” I spend some time explaining to her the danger we demons have when we hear the divinations and foretellings of witches. She seems to understand it quickly and deeply, steering well away from any attempt to ask me about what little I do know of Emily’s prophecy. She also mentions only once having done any divination, and tells me nothing about the information she sought. This is the one place where I have been unwisely curious. I know she is referring to the divination in her circle right before she started her relationship with Ben.

“So, is it safe for you to tell me how my fate is tied up with yours?” she asks.

“I have seen nothing myself of our future together. My only sense around you has been knowing that I need to leave the hunter alive and unharmed. She has some purpose yet to play.”

“Maybe getting Ben out of town and out of my life,” Ivy says.

“Perhaps so, perhaps not.”

“Do vampires ever. You know, with each other?” she asks.

“No. They only feel those desires for the warm.”

“I suppose somebody in the equation needs to have some body heat.”

Ivy turns to the window and watches the darkness as I drive into town. As we approach her home, I reach out with my senses to the little imp watching the trail above her house. It reports that the hunter has not been up there for the better part of two days. Unless she is surveilling the house from a different location, it should be safe to bring Ivy there. Realizing that taking the hunter’s motorcycle away from her has also freed her to approach the house from directions previously inaccessible.

She had been focused on Carl until I destroyed her bike. Feeling the push away from him also freed her up to pursue other avenues into finding Ben. I release the imp from its binding at the upper trail, with strict instructions to circle the property, very carefully, seeking any sign the vampire has been back. I tell it to be sure to search especially carefully around the ritual circles, for as much as it will be uncomfortable being so close to the protective spells around them. I need to know if the hunter has any inkling that Ivy is a witch. If that knowledge caused Ben to push her away so intensely, it may be very significant to the hunter as well.

“What are you doing?” Ivy asks. “Demonic magic of some sort?”

“You can pick that up?” I ask.

“Yes. Loud. You’re talking to something, another demon, aren’t you? A subordinate.”

“Impressive,” I say. “I am in touch with an imp your grandmother has summoned and bound to help watch your home while the hunter is in the area.”

“I’ve only realized it in the last few days, but ever since Ben and I had sex, I’ve been becoming increasingly sensitive to all sorts of power and magic around me, and my power has increased. Tonight, I completely resisted Ben’s attempts to use his compulsion on me. I didn’t even have to try to fight it. I had been practicing some defenses against vampires, simple ones that Grandma had taught me as a normal part of my lessons, focusing on keeping them subtle so Ben wouldn’t notice it. Well tonight, when he saw Carl on the property, he tried to compel me to stay in the cabin instead of helping him track Carl. It did nothing at all.”

I spend some time focusing on her. The amount of power she is showing seems to be the same as the last time I saw her, on the surface at

least. As I feel around her more, I can tell that she is a lot stronger, but it is also held tighter to her, closer, and it is brighter.

Now I want to know what is in Emily's prophecy. What is it about either Ben's claiming her, or the act of coupling with him that has finally unleashed those immense reserves of power that Ivy was born with. She was a smart and perceptive young witch a couple of weeks ago, but restrained. Technically proficient, but without art behind it, without a lot of force behind it. I cannot wait until I get to see her work now. Take her prior fastidious study, and couple it with the potential she has access to now, and the intuitive grasp of what magic is that she is now developing. It will be a truly wondrous and awesome thing, I suspect.

"Is Grandma home right now?" Ivy asks. "I have no idea what her schedule is, what day it is, even."

"She is home. She has put off her overnight runs until things with you are sorted out."

"I'm pretty embarrassed to see her quite yet. I know she's going to wake up as soon as I get near the house."

"We can drive for a while longer if you would like. I never actually sleep, so I can keep us going until dawn, just stopping for gas."

"Not that long. I eventually want to sleep in my own bed. I can take down the protections at my circle. I would like to spend some time there with you."

"Certainly," I say. "But Emily will still know you are back on the property."

"Yes, but if I go straight to my circle, she will give me privacy and time."

This is true. A witch's circle is highly respected by all other witches, and they do not enter another's without invitation. With this decision made,

Ivy seems to relax significantly. “Which route would you like to take to your circle?” I ask.

“I’m up for a little more walking,” she says.

I park my car downhill from her home, which leaves us a little over a half mile of a walk through the woods to get up to the property line. As we start to trek up the hill, Ivy remains silent, deep in thought. The imp assures me that the hunter has been nowhere near this side of the property, which allows me to relax my vigilance for her.

We reach the edge of Ivy’s circle. The routine protections she leaves on it between uses is nowhere near strong enough to deter me from entering it, but I never have, and do not now, out of respect for her. She stops at the edge of the circle and turns to face me. She looks a little up and to the right, and I realize what had her concentrating so hard on the walk up the hill.

“I will allow you to enter this space now, only if you promise to cause me no harm, now or in the future, in body, mind, emotion, or spirit, either through your action or inaction, by your own choice or by enticement or provocation of others. Do you abide by these terms, demon I know and have known as Nathan Marsh?”

It is her own variation on the standard agreement the Esseriya line has created for dealing with us. It is a good set of terms, covering most of the ways I could act against her. “I abide by these terms, young mortal Ivy Sparks,” I say.

“Good. Come here.” She takes a step backwards across the boundary of her circle. She takes on a glamour in my eyes as she does so. If I cross that same boundary, I will be subject to our agreement. She has offered nothing in return for my agreement to not cause her any sort of harm, which is wise. The easiest way for a demon to sidestep such an agreement is for a mortal to break it first. We are inconstant and distractible creatures after all. I can

see no reason why I would ever want to cause her any ill so it should be easy for me to walk into her circle and accept that obligation. But my kind do not like having our future actions restrained. Part of our great aversion to others' foretellings and prophecies, of our ambiguity to our own senses of the future.

Besides, just because I feel a certain way about Ivy now does not mean that I will always feel that way. Mortals. Inconstant creatures, ever changing, because your lives are too short to allow yourselves to be static.

Still. At this moment I can find no good reason, other than unseen future events, to not agree to not act against her wellbeing. Since I have been hesitating, she offers her hand. "Do you still abide by the terms and wish to enter?" she asks.

I reach across the edge of the circle and feel the entanglements I have agreed to start to wrap around my wrist. As I take her hand, they tighten until they almost feel solid. I step up to her, and once my whole body is inside of her circle, the words she spoke imprint themselves across my thoughts and my spirit. I am now, in some sense, a servant to her. My promise to not cause her harm by my inaction obligates me to help if she is in peril and I am able to assist. Being as powerful as I am, I think there is almost no place in the world from which I could not answer a summons to aid her.

Ivy gives me a second to catch my composure, to absorb what she has laid upon me, and she wraps me in a strong hug, holding tight to me for a long time. I wrap my arms around her as well, stroking her hair reassuringly. The way she clings to me tells me that despite her newfound power, her wisdom in laying her obligations upon me, she is still a mortal of just eighteen years, and that in the past few weeks everything about her world has changed in very deep and profound ways. She thought she was

just a short time from leaving Stokers Mill to go to college and start charting her own future, only to be caught up in events much greater than she is.

She finally breaks the hug and steps back from me.

“I brought you out here for a reason, Nathan. To this specific place.”

“Why is that?” I ask.

“What you have told me, that I’m supposed to end up with Carl somehow. Between some things Ben has said and the way you told me about Carl and I getting closer. We’re going to become lovers, aren’t we? The same way apparently Ben and I are fated to not be lovers.”

“I do not know your—”

“Stop,” Ivy says. “I don’t care what you see in my future or Ben’s or Carl’s right now. Just that I can tell that some entity has decided to tear me from Ben and throw me next into Carl’s bed for whatever reasons it has. And I’m not complaining about ending up with Carl. Once Ben lit that fire in me, I realized that Carl had always lit it for me, but I’d just been ignoring it, pretending he was more my brother than a rather attractive and beautiful man in his own right, who would do very well by me.”

“I should remain silent about that?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, very definitively. “Just listen, let me say this one thing, and hold your tongue about anything you know about anything until tomorrow, ok?”

I nod in agreement.

“I’m sick of feeling like fate’s plaything right now, and I know better than to fight any of it. I know. Grandma has always made sure I understood that any future I see is going to come to pass, and I should just woman up, face it on my feet with my eyes open, my middle finger out loud and proud if necessary.”

“I am sorry that your future with Carl feels tainted this way,” I say.

“It doesn’t,” Ivy says. “Like I said, I think I have always known that Carl and I could have been something good. Now I have confirmation.”

“But there is more you are feeling,” I say. “You are radiating defiance right now. Your middle finger is up and out.”

“I want to go to Carl with no regrets,” Ivy says.

I suddenly see where this is going. “That fire Ben lit in you. You realized you have always had feelings for another that you had suppressed as well.”

“Sate my curiosity, Nathan. Don’t send me off to Carl, always wondering what it might have been like with you.”

“No,” I say, backing away slightly, but not quite leaving her circle. She has no more authority over me within it or without, but I did enter into this space upon her invitation, and I would not be so rude to Ivy as to lightly leave it without her, or without her bidding me farewell. “Impregnating you would bring you great harm, and you just bound me to not do so.”

“You can’t get me pregnant, Nathan,” she says, stepping closer to me. “I already am.”

“That is not possible,” I say. “Vampires are sterile.”

“Turns out Ben isn’t. Trust me on this one, Nathan. A witch always knows.”

That last sentence is true. Witches learn a great deal about their own bodies as they learn their power.

“You have always wanted this, too, Nathan,” she whispers to me. “This is your chance. Take it.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ivy Sparks

Nathan considers this new piece of information for a moment, looking hard at me. “This changes my feelings on your offer,” he says.

“It’s not an offer, Nathan. Consider it a demand.”

“Best I not think of it that way. Please be mindful to always watch your use of words around me.”

“Then give me something more productive to do with my mouth than talk,” I say.

“If you insist,” Nathan says.

He steps closer to me, runs one hand around to the back of my neck and grabs a handful of my hair. I expect him to pull me into a kiss, but instead, he puts his other hand on my shoulder, and makes it very clear that he wants me down on my knees. As I sink down in front of him, it is very clear that in the blink of an eye, all of his clothes have vanished. “Be careful what you demand,” he says. “I just might give it to you.”

Just as quickly, where I was feeling Nathan’s hand on my shoulder through the fabric of my hoodie, suddenly it is just bare skin on bare skin. And his touch is hot. Fiercely hot. As long as I’ve known Nathan, he’s always felt like he was running a mild fever, but now, he’s burning up in a most delicious way.

In the time I'd spent with Ben, touching him, when he'd fed his body would be warm to the touch, even hot the first time we'd been intimate together, but it was a very different kind of heat, seeming to come from within him, from under his skin which was always dry to the touch.

Nathan's fire is all-encompassing, it seems like he actually heats the air around him, as if he is giving me that heat wherever his skin touches mine. My shoulder, where he is gently pushing me down, feels warm all the way down to the bone. After two weeks with Ben as a lover, and looking forward to Carl, I am ecstatic that I decided to take Nathan at least once, and that he accepted. And with that, I realize it is time to put my thoughts of those two other men completely out of my mind. If I will only have Nathan once, this moment needs to be completely about him.

I blink and give my head a little shake as a final, physical commitment to clearing my mind of those distractions.

"Good girl," I hear Nathan say, with a little bit of a twist of the handful of hair he has. His left hand leaves my shoulder, and he takes a hold of his semi-erect member. Even at just half-mast, there is an almost intimidating size to it. As he pulls my face closer, I have no doubt in my mind what he intends, and how this is going to go. I offered my body to Nathan, and now he is going to take it, and it appears he has no intention of being a gentleman about it. And I decide I am going to give it to him, however he wants it.

As I open my mouth to take him in, I remind myself that he is bound to cause me no harm, and wonder where exactly the lines lie between harm, pain, and pleasure. The soreness in my jaw from opening up to accommodate him, the pressure at the back of my throat as he presses on the back of my head and pushes forward make it clear that I'm about to start learning.

Nathan holds me still, keeping himself deep in my mouth. I can feel his pulse with my tongue, and with every beat of his heart, he becomes larger, harder, and hotter. I finally have to put both hands on his hips and push myself back so I can take a breath. Between my excitement, a little bit of apprehension and fear at how assertive he is being, and just his size, I find myself panting. I look up at Nathan's face, and see that he is determined, but he is also watching carefully the look on my face, looking into my eyes, watching me breathe. I realize that he may not be acting like a gentleman right now, but that he has no intention of mistreating me. This goes beyond his obligation to not harm me, I can see that he is also carefully watching my reactions to push me beyond what I'd be comfortable giving. I see in his eyes a promise to drag me right up to the limits of what I can and will endure, but to not cross them.

I nod my head to let him know I'm ready to continue, and before I know it, my mouth is wrapped around him again and I can barely breathe. I have heard of the trick of wrapping a hand around the shaft and stroking, to give the man sensation along his entire length, so he is not as driven to penetrate so deep into your mouth. It seems to work. The pressure at the back of my throat decreases, his hand at the back of my neck does not push as hard. Soon, we seem to wordlessly negotiate a rhythm, as I learn how to synchronize the work of my hand and my mouth. A few times, he even lets me back off entirely to catch my breath, and as long as I continue to stroke, he doesn't put himself back into my mouth right away.

I put my free hand on the joint where the front of his thigh and his body meet. His hot skin is slightly slick with a fine patina a sweat. He adjusts his footing, to where he is standing square in front of me, solidly planted on the ground. I start to hear him moaning, and his hand on the back of my hand gets more insistent, upping he pace, starting to push deep again. I know

what is about to happen, and I don't want it to. There is another part of me that desperately wants to embrace what I have in my mouth, to pleasure it, to take in what he is about to give me, but he tightens his grip on my hair, puts his hand back on my shoulder to keep me on my knees. I take both hands and put them on his hips, and start to push away. At that cue, his hands relax their hold on me. I can tell by the way his hips are undulating, by his breathing, by a quiver in his legs that he is right on the very verge. But instead of forcing me, I feel him forcing his own body to relax, to back away from the moment of climax, to offer me the chance to do something else.

On the one hand, I am dying to have him inside of me, aching for it. On the other, I did offer myself to him, and I did decide, when I saw that he was going to take me, to give him whatever he wanted. He does not know I made that promise to myself, but I know it is a bad idea to ever go back on your end of a promise where a demon is involved. I pull my mouth off so I can take a quick, deep breath. "Finish it," I say, before I wrap my lips around him again, and suck hard to take as much of him in as I possibly can. Permission given, Nathan pushes himself deep into my mouth again almost, but not quite, to the point that I choke. He makes a dozen slow but very insistent thrusts, his thighs quacking, his hand twisting my hair painfully, a deep grunt of pleasure coming from his throat. As I feel him start to pump, I brace myself, wondering what it will be like to take a man's climax in my mouth, especially one so strong from a man as endowed as Nathan. But he pulls out at the last moment, and mercifully spills the massive dose of hot fluid on my breasts.

I am curious about what it might have been like, so I run my fingertip through it and taste it. It is strong and bitter, thick and a little salty. I know of nothing else in the world that tastes like it, and I wonder if a man's seed

is really that strange compared to any other flavor, or if Nathan's being a demon has something to do with it.

Using the hand that is still in my hair, he pulls me up to my feet, pulls me against him, and starts to kiss me deeply. The light, fine hair on his chest feels strange as it is slick with his sweat, as he presses it into the mess he left on my chest. He reaches his free hand around to take a firm handful of my bottom, kneading it, interjecting one of his thighs between mine to open them up.

I can't help but grind myself against his firm and muscular thigh. I resign myself to taking my pleasure that way, when I realize that he is still rock hard and standing tall. I break the kiss to look at him while I take it in my hand.

Nathan smiles and says, "You certainly did not think that was all, did you?"

"I had no idea," I say.

"It pleases me greatly that you chose to submit to my will that way. Let me reward you," he says. For the first time since I told him to take me, he takes his hand out of my hair. He runs it down my back, dragging his nails hard across my skin until that hand starts to squeeze and knead my cheeks. For my part, I keep stroking him, savoring the anticipation of having that glorious part of him up inside of me.

He takes his right hand off of my backside, and spins me around, so my back is up against him. He licks his fingers, and bends his knees a bit so he can reach down between my legs. For as forceful as he has been up until now, his fingers are surprisingly gentle as he parts my lower lips and seeks out the warm wetness inside of me. I feel his fingers dance and he brings his head down, to put his ear next to my mouth. I am barely aware that he is carefully listening to my breath and my voice as he explores.

He finds a certain spot inside of me that makes my breath catch, and I shudder as I inhale. My knees go weak and he shifts to hold me while he rubs his fingers rapidly on that spot until mighty waves of pleasure burst through me. I think I may even black out for a moment at the height of the orgasm, because the next thing I know, I am facing him, and he's picking me up. I instinctively wrap my arms and legs around him, because I need some solid anchor in the world while I come down from that climax.

It doesn't take me long to realize that he still isn't finished with me, when I feel him lower me down until he is right on the verge of entering me. I'm not ready yet, so I tighten my grip on him and lift myself up a bit. He seems content for now to simply hold onto me while I take a break to come back fully to the real world. The whole time, I don't feel even the slightest tremor in his legs while he supports the weight of both of us, no sign that his hold on me is flagging. The simple physical endurance he has, not to mention the fact that his body was still ready to go for another round immediately after his first orgasm makes my head swim again. How would one live with a lover like him? Two days in a relationship with him, and I don't think I'd be able to ever walk straight again!

I am still aching unbelievably inside for him, though. The fingers were amazing, but most definitely not what I really want from him tonight. I loosen my hold on him and he lets me slowly slide down his body. I take a deep breath in, and as I feel our most intimate parts touch, I let it out slowly, anticipating some discomfort. Fortunately, despite his size, I am so eager to have him in me, so well prepared, physically, by his attentions, that my body accepts him easily. He still fills me entirely, more than I ever thought possible, and I am glad that he waits until I am able to relax around him before he starts moving.

Much like when I had him in my mouth, it takes me a little bit to figure out how to move my body. It seems like it should be easier than it is to coordinate the thighs wrapped around his waist and the arms thrown over his shoulders and over his neck, but the intense sensations shivering up my body seem to throw all of my parts out of synch with each other. He helps greatly by using his own core and his hands, now gripping my upper thighs, to set an easy rhythm for us.

Eventually I get all of my limbs and his working together, and am able to abandon myself to the moment. I climax twice this way, thankful that the night is still somewhat cool, because between the workout I'm getting, and powerful furnace that is Nathan, I need some relief. By this time, I am nearly spent, between the physical exertion and three bone-shaking orgasms. Between our sweat and the gentle scrub his chest scruff rubbing against me, the result of his earlier spill across my breasts has long since washed away.

"Do you have one more in you?" he whispers in my ear.

"You'll have to carry me to the house," I say.

Nathan lowers himself to his knees then leans forward, gently lowering me to the ground. The cool earth feels so good on my skin as it starts to slowly draw some of the excess heat out of me. He doesn't lower his body onto mine, which also helps me cool some, and I find that I have more than enough energy to let him bring me up and over the peak one more time. I spread my arms out wide while he settles himself into a comfortable position to finish up. As when he was in my mouth, he takes up a pace that is slow, but authoritative and firm. His own pleasure starts building steadily as he goes, I can track his trek up to the apex of his own pleasure, and it is easy for me to follow him up. When he makes that final thrust into me, and I hear that entrancing sound come out of his mouth again and I feel his hot

seed pour into and overflow my body, it pushes me over the edge as well. His orgasm is way more powerful than the one I have, but I have also had three righteous ones myself. So having this last one be quieter is perfect. It helps bring me down from the intense and flaming high I was on, and I get to watch and experience the pleasure my body is giving to him. It feels much more intimate that way.

As he finally finishes, he relaxes, but still leaves a few inches of space between our chests so the soft breeze can send more cooling air across me. It takes a while, but eventually I start to feel cold as my sweat dries. I pull him close to me, now needing his heat again.

“Thank you,” he tells me, as he settles his weight onto me. “I would have been greatly saddened to have never shared that with you.”

“Same,” is the only word I can manage to get out, as I’m still breathing hard from what he had just done to me. I realize it is hard to think of what just happened as love making. It was certainly intimate and attentive, there was genuine emotion shared between us, but it was so different. Nathan, once I gave myself to him, possessed me. I chuckle a little bit as I think of it that way. I was just possessed by a demon. But it was still very much an act of mutual pleasure and affection, even though he took control and took whatever pleasure he wanted from my body. I let myself feel my emotions as they happen, while Nathan lays on top of me. I have no regrets at having given my body to him for his use, and in fact, think that this lesson in another way that sex can be had will serve me well in the future.

I take a couple breaths to steady myself, and ask Nathan, “You still respect me after all of that, right?”

“I would never have done any of that if I did not respect you,” he says. “I will always cherish the memory of what you just gave me.”

“Am I a bad person for having done it?”

“Because soon you will share your body with Carl? No. Not at all.”

Chapter Thirty

Carl Wilson

When I get home, Grandma's car is right in front of my house. I am tempted to just keep on driving, but I know I won't be able to escape her. Plus, she's the type of woman where it's to just step up and take your lumps if you've crossed her, because she's not going to forget, and she's going to give you extra for having tried to run.

I pull my car into the garage, and meet her at the door. She's way to proper to tear into me outside at this time of night, so I unlock the door.

"Before you jump all over me," I say, "You have been spying on me for weeks. So I got out from under you for a bit. So what?"

"I specifically told you to not go looking for Ivy and Ben. You'll put her in grave danger."

"I can't just sit around waiting for terrible things to happen to her," I say. "You know that."

"That hunter is coming up short on finding them. You are leading her right to them. If I could track you, she certainly has been."

"Maybe everybody needs to just stop tracking me!" I want to shout that, but I can't seem to rouse up the energy. "And while I'm on the subject

of things that are pissing me off, what did you do to me? Where is the wolf?"

"It's suppressed for a few days. It's better that way."

"Emily!" I say. I think it's the first time in years that I have used her name. "I really need you to stop tampering with my life. I love you and Ivy, but I've lost her, and you're pushing me away. There's nothing that ties me to this town. Nothing. Maybe the best thing for me to do is forget about your family entirely and go back down south or something."

"No, Carl. You are needed here. Ivy needs you."

"Ivy threw me out of her life."

"She did, but she still needs you. When she gets back into town, she'll understand a lot more than she did when she left, and she'll know what she had with you."

"And you know this because you can see the future. So there's something else pushing me around. You, vampires, some vague tomorrow. Does nothing in the world want me to just live my life and be who I am?"

"Ivy does. Ivy wants you to be who you are. Just don't go back out there again, so you don't get her killed. Wait for her to come to you."

"I won't go back out there," I say.

"Why?" Emily asks. "What did you see?"

"More of Ivy than I ever thought I would, that's for sure." I sigh. "It's probably a good thing you did whatever it is you did. If you hadn't put the wolf to bed for a while, it would have come out when I saw her and Ben together."

"I know you don't want to hear this, Carl, but sometimes you do need to trust others. I know this has been hard on you."

"Next time, tell me why you want me to do or not do things. This secret keeping has been killing me."

“Carl. You don’t want that. Nobody is happy when they know what is going to happen.”

“Well maybe you need to stop carrying all of that misery alone.”

“Grab a couple of beers,” she says.

“I’ll grab you one, but I want something stronger,” I say, opening one of my kitchen cabinets, and reaching behind a dozen cans to grab the bottle of tequila laying on its side, hidden behind them.

“I’ll take some of that, too,” she says, sitting down at my kitchen table. I go for a couple of glasses, but she tells me to skip them.

I put the bottle on the table and sit. She pulls out the stopper and takes a good sip. “Boy. You need to learn to drink.”

“It’s what an underage guy can get easily,” I say, taking the bottle from her and putting a mouthful down. She does have a point, though. Cheap tequila is not pleasant.

“You want to be your own man, chart your own course. I get it. Let me tell you how walking this route for a little longer lets you do that.”

“Make it good,” I say.

“It took me some time to put all of the pieces together, but you, Ben, Nathan, and Ivy are going to put the war between the vampires and the werewolves to bed. Maybe not forever, but for a very long time.”

“How?” I ask.

“There is a reason you three men have all been drawn here to Stokers Mill, and to friendship with Ivy specifically. All three of you men have been taken in by her when our peers rejected you. You and Nathan have been here long enough that Ivy’s affection for you has gotten other people to see you differently and to warm to you. If Ben had come into town a year ago, the same would have happened to him.”

“So we’re all going to show the zombie clans and the packs that Ben and I can live together and even be in a love triangle over a girl, and they’ll all slap their foreheads, and say, ‘Wow! We can all be best of buds, we don’t have to fight!’”

“No,” Emily says. She offers me the bottle. “Take a good belt. This is about to get strange,” she says.

I pull a big mouthful off the bottle, and set it down. The alcohol burns harsh going down, enough to water my eyes and double me over. When I can sit up straight again, I say, “Ok. I’m ready.”

But it turns out I wasn’t. By the time she finishes her story, full of demons and a mother that bore twins, a zombie and a wolf, and they fought, and they made more like themselves that fought, and that was three millennia back. And then she keeps going on, to the present day. She had received a prophecy from her own great grandmother, and everything points to Ivy being the subject of it, but the prophecy was unclear. But then Ben arrived, and she was able to pick up his senses of the future from him, and there was something about Nathan knowing something about me, and that made everything super clear to her somehow.

“So, Ben has changed Ivy by being with her, and now she’s turning away from Ben to be with me, and that is going to fix everything? First, that is completely ridiculous, and second…” There’s enough hard liquor in me that I lose my train of thought briefly. “Second. Where does Nathan fit into all of this?”

“By now, you should know,” she says.

I tap the side of the tequila bottle. “I don’t know anything for sure right now.”

“Well,” she says. “By the time you sober up, I’m sure it’ll be clear. Come here.” She stands up and opens her arms wide. I have always been

glad that the wolf seriously dislikes booze. It makes me a maudlin drunk instead of an angry or unpredictable one. “Good night, Carl.”

“Good night, Grandma.”

Morning comes with sunlight coming in through a curtain I did not shut the night before, and a really unpleasant hangover. I forgot to drink my fill of water before collapsing into bed, and now my mouth feels like it’s full of old socks and my head is pounding.

But clarity comes with it as well. I am able to reconstruct most of the story Grandma told me the night before, and realize Nathan’s place in the whole story. He’s a demon, that’s what I was never able to put my finger on before. Now that I know, it is glaringly obvious, but pack lore has it that major demons, the kind that can pass as pinkies, stopped concerning themselves with human affairs long ago, which means I had no reason to suspect he was anything of the sort. Kind of like having a friend who was born in the Soviet Union or Rhodesia or some other country that doesn’t even exist anymore. Unless you have a specific reason to ask, ‘Hey. Where were you born?’, you don’t, you just assume they were probably born in the same town they were living in when you met.

I think back to something else Grandma told me last night. When she mentioned that she had picked up on Ben’s sensing, fear dropped on my like a ton of bricks. Hearing Grandma say that she fully believed in Ben’s sense reminded me of his warning to me, of a Negre killing me in the process of finding out where Ivy was.

“Don’t beat yourself up too bad over that one,” she says. “You did your part to prevent that exact future from coming to pass. The lies to your friends, the amount of time you did spend very pointedly sticking to school and your job, the fact that you held off on searching for them as long as you had. It bought Ben and Ivy enough time to change their situation, and gave

others enough time to disrupt the hunter. That's the tricky and funny thing about fate. You can't change the future, but you can change the present enough to create different futures."

That actually made more sense last night while I was more than half blitzed on bad tequila than it does now. I feel a lot better, with her reassurance that my actions over the past few days aren't going to get Ivy killed. I also promise myself that I need to stay away from that highway entirely, so I don't change the present again to make futures where Ivy dies by my actions more likely again. Deep inside of me, the wolf is rumbling awake after its deep slumber of the past few days. I don't know if it's awake enough to help, but I throw some clothes on, pound a quart of water, and take a walk around my property.

There's a positive reek of skunk coming from downhill. I noticed it last night, but had other things on my mind when I got home. Any other day, I wouldn't think twice about something like that, but if you want to hide your scent, there are a few things that will do it quite well, and the acrid miasma of skunk is a good, but somewhat obvious choice.

I take a walk out to my back fence, where the stink is coming from, taking a good look around. I find no dead skunk out there, no track predator tracks and no place I can identify as a kill in the epicenter of the odor. Whatever caused it is strong enough that even with the wolf out, I'd never be able to catch any other scent underneath it. If this is evidence of the hunter watching my house, she is either not very good at what she does – very unlikely from what I know of her, or like Grandma says, she was seriously disrupted.

I go back to the house. My phone is still in my cellar, outside my cage. I know that is how Grandma has been keeping an eye on my movements. The hunter apparently is willing to embrace technology as well as her more

arcane abilities. I go into the garage, jack up the right side of my car, and grab a flashlight and my creeper. It doesn't take me long to find a GPS tracker tucked into the underbody.

I decide to leave it in place for now, because I have an idea. I retrieve my phone and open up the app that Ivy and I shared. It will show both of our travels over the past few weeks. I notice that in all that time, Ivy's phone has been sitting in her house, where mine has been busy, but mostly in a predictable pattern. Home, school, work, my circuitous route out to meet Grandma at the truck stop right after Ivy disappeared, a couple of runs to Denver with Kate and Nathan. There are two major deviations from that pattern - the two stops I made near the cabin Ben and Ivy are hiding out in are unfortunately very conspicuous by their singularity. What would make them stand out even more to whoever put that GPS tracker on my car is the fact that the runs to Denver were both in Kate's car. The two trips to the cabin specifically were in mine.

If the Great War were still going on, stupid things like this are exactly what would get me killed. I was so focused on my personal rivalry with Ben that I forgot to think about how he and I are both former soldiers, as is the hunter I was trying to deceive. It could have been a very, very expensive mistake.

I know that even with the hunter's work interrupted, she may still be watching me. If not her, somebody might be watching that GPS tracker on my car. To pop it off would be too suspicious, but my travels recently are aiming straight at Ben and Ivy.

I can't just go out and warn them myself. I call Grandma to tell her what I've found, but get routed straight to voicemail. I leave a brief and cryptic message to let her know somebody needs to get word out to them. I try Nathan, too. Now that I know what he is, I figure he may have some

means of getting there completely undetected, but I get the default voicemail message that came with his phone, the one I'm used to, and that he refuses to change. As I get frustrated that I can't get one of the two of them out to warn Ivy and Ben, I feel the wolf rousing itself even more. It's going to want to act, but this new knowledge I have is something even it can't help but heed. I feel its blood heating up as it feels wisdom restraining its actions, but it seems willing to control itself for a while.

I go to my kitchen, drink more water while cooking breakfast and making coffee for myself. I try to distract myself by doing some studying for final exams this coming week, but there's way too much on my mind to concentrate on anything at all. Neither Grandma nor Nathan calls me back, which doesn't help calm me at all, but I'm still able to keep my impulse to go warn Ben and Ivy myself under control. As soon as I have some food in me, I hop in the car and drive into town.

Kate is certainly at home and buried in books, and right now, I would like the comfort of her company. Nathan is known to hate his phone and simply not look at it, sometimes for a couple days at a time. So he may very well be at home, in which case I can talk to him directly and get something done.

I'm just putting my dishes in the sink to rinse them when there's a knock on my door. I dry my hands and reach under the sink for a silvered fighting knife. I don't think the hunter would be bold enough to just walk up and knock on my door, but if she wants to get inside my house, she does need me to invite her in. If it's any other sort of trouble at the door, if she has some human helpers like most zombies do, well a knife is a knife is a knife.

I stand look through the peephole in my door. Whoever is knocking is carefully standing outside of its range. I shift a little bit, so I can keep the

knife hidden from view, but still at the ready, and open the door a crack to peer onto the corner of the stoop that’s hidden from the peephole.

And I see Ivy standing there.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ben Wake

Watching Ivy get into Nathan's car just pulls the heart right out of me. Seeing her get into any car at this moment would, but somehow it seems to pull at me harder that she is driving away from me with an old friend that she has known for most of her life. If she had caught a ride with some random stranger coming up the highway, it would have hurt to know that I was sending her away, breaking her heart, because we are not meant to be together. That would give me a sense that she is continuing to live her life, to keep moving on with her life after our brief happy and troubled time together. All relations between vampires and the warm have to end with the warm one moving on somehow, whether by simply leaving the relationship, dying, or turning.

But seeing Ivy greet Nathan and leave me behind. It gives me some sense that our time together was an anomaly, a step outside of the life she was living. Like she has her own path she is on, and had only briefly flirted with a different life before deciding it was not as good as the one I could give her.

I think I can understand another piece of how some of my kind become so furious and contemptuous of the warm after a while. Since I was turned, I have always been stronger than, faster than, smarter than, greater than,

more than any warm mortal. For the first time ever, I feel like I am lesser than them, and it is making me furious as much as it is making me sad. It's like this petulant child inside of me is railing against her. I was offering her a life that only a tiny handful of warm will ever have. As a vampire I can take her places, show her things, that almost nobody will ever know and see. But she is giving all of that up to live the same uninteresting and mundane life that the other seven billion short lived warm on the planet are living. All of this fury burns through me even though I am the one pushing Ivy away, I am the one who decided to send her one way while I go the other.

I sit down on the ground, my attempts to see if the hunter is out there all but forgotten. Even when I consider the possibility that she is following Ivy and Nathan, I cannot summon up any concern. I come back to myself long enough to examine my feelings and try to count how many different emotions have just blasted through me in the last few minutes. All tied to a single word, 'Witch', and the last thing Sonia Vătafu ever said to me.

"Someday, young Benjamin, one of us Negre is going to bed a witch, and every one of us will feel the sun. Not a one of us will escape the sun, not a single Negre, not a single drinker of any other clan. Only the one who raises the sun will escape the sun."

When she spoke those words to me, her eyes took on the pale gray of a body drained of all blood, and her voice came from a place a million miles deep within her. She was speaking truth about the future, immutable truth. Most vampire sensings are warnings – keep walking this path, and this is where it leads. What Sonia Vătafu was speaking was not a warning, it was an inevitability. Unfortunately, some others heard the words, for she spoke them to me at the clan castle, and there are no secrets there. Papa Racoviță recognized that such knowledge is power, and has carefully hoarded it. He

almost killed me just for having heard the words, but he knew that he could not keep the secret completely to himself. He needed a select few others that knew of Sonia Vătafu's vision that would be able to recognize if the secret had spread and would be able to stamp the knowledge out for him. This information I have is probably part of how I ended up framed for a murder I did not commit, and why I was always certain that Papa Racoviță wanted me to die for it. This is why I am so dangerous to them as a renegade. This is why I need to get Ivy as far from me as possible, because if any Negre ever suspects she is a witch, they will destroy her and her grandmother.

Plus, Sonia Vătafu's words tell of the end of all vampires. As much as I feel the ennui of immortality, I have thus far done nothing to hasten my own death. In fact, my time with Ivy showed me that even though I'm now an immortal, it is possible for me to still live and to feel genuine and real joy. Why would I choose to give that up so soon after I found it? I have to laugh at the cruel irony that I had to give up the person that taught me that so soon after learning it.

I look to my right, and see the kitchen knife that Ivy had modified into a ritual blade. It reminds me that I did send Ivy away to protect her, and that there is still more I must do for her. I owe it to her on so many levels. I need to make sure there is nothing at all on the property that would give the hunter even the slightest suspicion that Ivy is a witch, just in case she is aware of Sonia Vătafu's words.

I pick up the knife. The symbols scratched into the handle are scored too deep for me to sand them out. I could file the handle down, but that would be immediately apparent as well. The knife needs to be destroyed. I pick up the rifle Ivy had dropped, and carry it down to the cabin. As I approach the front porch, I try to look at it with critical eyes. Witches are

very secretive about their practices, and each line does things very differently. I could spend years studying them, and after all of that, still not be able to scratch the surface of all of the practices and habits and signs that are out there.

But I do have just enough knowledge to know some commonalities, and from there, I can try to extrapolate meaning from things. Like recognizing the kitchen knife for what Ivy had turned it into. Almost all lines use physical objects to focus will and intent, and almost all of them use a blade or a wand, as these are things you can aim and point with. Seeing Ivy focusing on a knife, then seeing that she had made modifications to the handle gave me just enough evidence to consider the possibility that I was watching her do magic.

So I stop before I step onto the front porch of the cabin. I noticed that when I was showing Ivy around the property on our first few days, she very quickly picked up on the placement of the stones that marked the emergency caches by the highway. It seemed intuitive to her, so I start looking at the ground. Sure enough, I eventually notice a pattern of alternating dark and light stones completely circling the cabin. Just small stones, pebbles not much larger than a quarter, with a good couple of feet between each, but the spacing between them is precise, as is their distance from the cabin. I decide to take a walk toward one of the places I'd set up to funnel the motion of any vampires on the property. Sure enough, there are lighter and darker stones flanking the path. I go back to the cabin, and notice something else. I had noticed couple of times that Ivy was moving plants around the land. She was very careful with it, only small ones. I had assumed she was just settling in for the long haul, and wanted a few of her favorite food plants and cooking herbs closer in, but in light of what I know now.

I go into the cabin, and look at the kitchen. There is one knife that she always kept in an empty can on the countertop, never in the drawer with the rest of the cutlery. There are a few other cans that hold sprigs of different herbs clustered around it. I wonder if that knife, like one I have in my hand, had been redesignated to special use, which is why it was kept separate from the other knives.

I wonder how many other clues somebody more knowledgeable in the ways of witches might pick up from the cabin. I decide the risk is too great to leave an unknown number of hints laying about. I go out and pick up as many of the carefully arranged stones as I can find on the property. I set the two knives Ivy seems to have put to different use onto the stove. With a little bit of fiddling with the propane tanks, and judicious application of cooking oil, crushed candles, and lamp oil to different areas, I set the cabin up to destroy it completely as possible.

Even though I only lived in it for a short time, those few weeks were by far the happiest of my life. I feel a tremendous sorrow knowing I need to burn it all down. But I still cannot let anything happen to Ivy. So I leave as little trace of her behind me as I take myself far, far away from Stokers Mill.

I set things up to have the cabin explode in about an hour. It takes me just ten minutes to see a car with Nebraska plates on it coming up the highway. A little bit of compulsion, and I’m on my way to Omaha.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Nathan Marsh

Some hours later, getting on toward three in the morning, Ivy wakes up with a start. She opens her eyes, and I can see the light dawn in them when she figures out where she is, and remembers why she is laying there curled up against my side, both of us still naked. She burrows closer to me for warmth and I feel her starting to drift off again.

“No, dear girl,” I say, gently shaking her shoulder. “Time for you to get into your own bed.” She opens her eyes again, rubs the sleep from them, and stretches. The ground of her circle is not the best for sleeping on, and honestly, I think that more than anything is what convinces her that she should get up.

Getting our clothing back from the other space where I had tucked them is easy, but the garments are unbelievably cold when they come back. I have to bundle Ivy’s clothes up and hold onto them for a few minutes to warm the up before she can get dressed. We walk, hand in hand, out of the wood together and toward the house. Emily is sitting in the den with the lights on, and watches us as we approach.

“You should go,” she says, turning toward me. She lifts herself up on tiptoes to kiss me. I gently embrace her, as we exchange a reasonably polite kiss. I want it to last a lot longer, knowing that what had just happened

between us is most likely a singular occurrence, and that this may be the last lovers' kiss – even if it is relatively chaste – that I will ever get from her. "I made this mess. I need to deal with it."

I am not surprised when Emily opens the door, because I felt her moving across the house, but Ivy is startled, and jumps with a little yelp.

"Both of you, inside," Emily says.

"I am not bound to obey you," I say.

"Just, come in, Nathan," Emily says. She seems more weary at the moment, exasperated, than upset or angry.

As Emily walks toward the den, Ivy says, "I really need a shower before we do any of this. Please?" I am very well aware that Ivy and I smell like we have just had very hot and sweaty sex, and judging by her posture, I suspect that is part of her current discomfort as well. But she also likely just needs it as a way to figuratively wash off the stress of the day, to reacclimate to the house and to the presence of her grandmother, and take a little time to gather her thoughts and her emotions together before what she suspects is going to be a very difficult conversation.

Emily nods her assent, and says to me, clear enough for Ivy to hear it as she heads upstairs, "You might as well clean up, too, Nathan. Looks like you two did a lot of running through the woods."

I head for the smaller bathroom, off of the guest bedroom on the first floor of the house. The dresser and closet in that room have a few changes of clothes for Kate, Carl, and myself. I step into the shower, careful to not turn the hot water all the way on, as Ivy and I need to share. As I clean the delicious scent of Ivy's body from mine, I can feel the water also extinguishing certain fires that had still been burning bright within me since Ivy first gave me that come hither look in her circle. The memories of her body do not fade as the physical evidence is washed away, but they seem to

transform by the act from things I desire to do again, to something I did once and will always remember with warmth. I hope that Ivy's feelings toward what we had done are making a similar shift, so she can go to Carl without being burdened by a continued fire for me.

The water upstairs is still running after I am dried off and dressed, I detour through the kitchen to pour a pitcher of water, take a large glass from the cabinet, and assemble a plate of fruit. I set these on the end table beside Ivy's chair. Even without what she and I have just done, the poor girl has been through quite a lot in the last few hours, all of it emotionally intense and physical. She needs to eat and drink, to nourish her body and to help her center and ground herself.

"I will keep up the fiction that I suspect nothing," Emily says, as I sit down. "As long as there are no lasting effects."

It is clear that she is talking about what happened between Ivy and I in her circle, but I cannot tell whether Emily is upset with me or not. I can tell, but the way she is sitting and the tone of her words, that she wants absolutely no details.

I briefly consider letting her know that it was initiated completely by Ivy, that I had no thought of any such thing at the time, but feel if she is not upset at me, any attempt to explain my part in it will make her so. I content myself with just a simple nod of thanks.

"But you can tell me why you two are together right now. I didn't think you knew where she was."

"You know that I followed Carl," I say. "You've talked to him within the last hour."

"So where is Ben?"

"From what Ivy tells me of their last conversation, he is making a very fast escape from here, doing as much as he can to make sure he gets the

Negre's attention. He knows she is a witch now, and has implied that he knows something of the future, that it is a very, very bad thing for him to get involved with a witch. She knows I am a demon, now, by the way."

"How?"

I laugh a little bit. "She asked me what my big scary secret was, so I told her."

"She took it how?"

"Between Ben outing himself and Carl both, she seemed unsurprised. I think it would have troubled her if I were just a plain mortal and not something other, after the events of the past few weeks of her life."

We both hear Ivy's tread on the squeaky step of the staircase, and stop talking about her.

Ivy sits down, and quietly mouths, "Thank you," to me as she pours herself a glass of water. I reach over to the plate of fruit, and she slides it a couple inches my way, taking a glance at me. We lock eyes for just a second, a silent agreement that we understand that what happened inside of her circle will not be repeated, but is not regretted. That is the best outcome possible for either of us in the current situation, so I smile to her. She smiles back, and starts to tell her grandmother the story of what happened the morning she vanished, and the events that have transpired right up until the moment she saw my car parked along the highway.

"And now here you are," Emily says, to make it clear that she has no interest in that window of time between her getting into my car, and us walking into the house. "You must be exhausted, Ivy."

"I am. I think I could sleep for a month right now."

"And I should get home as well, before my family knows I've been out all night again."

Ivy hugs us and heads upstairs.

Emily walks me to the door. “Her feelings about Carl?” she asks quietly.

“She told me that her time with Ben made her realize what she had in Carl, and I think she looks forward to seeing him again soon. I have done my part for the piece of the future you have burdened me with, and I have not yet suffered any misfortune for it. Do not ever lay another such weight upon me again.” I make sure she understands that last part is not a request.

“I shouldn’t have, I know,” she says. “Please understand how much else I have not told you, and how much I am continuing to keep to myself.”

I can see genuine contrition in her eyes. This softens my temper, and I say, “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ivy Sparks

When I first put my head on my pillow, I briefly wonder if I'll be able to sleep at all, since I've had Ben beside me every night since our first night together, with the exception of having fallen asleep in Nathan's arms just a little bit ago. The exhaustion of everything catches up with me almost immediately, though. I barely have time to realize that some part of me is melding my feelings for those two men into something that is not a memory, as much as it is a memory of how it felt to be held by someone that I loved. Even as angry as I am at Ben for how suddenly he just abandoned me, I will never be able to forget the good moments of quiet contentment and of passion between us. The same with Nathan. Even though we were lovers for just an hour or so, I have spent most of my life with his companionship. A thousand positive emotions I have felt for both of them stir together as I drift off to sleep.

Morning comes bright with the smell of coffee drifting up from downstairs. I have to look at my phone to see that it's a Saturday. Being away with Ben with neither my phone nor any calendars in the cabin had me forgetting to worry about what day it was. That's why I never heard Grandma coming up the steps to get me, despite the fact that it's well into midmorning.

When I did look at my phone, I saw that there were a ton of notifications stacked up. There's a part of me that just wants to blank them all, and just pretend that for the past few weeks, the world outside of Ben's cabin simply didn't exist at all, and that the best thing to do would be to figure out what Grandma had told everybody about my sudden absence, and just play along until I catch up naturally.

I get dressed and go downstairs. Grandma is in the den reading. I greet her, and from the sound of her voice and the gentle look on her face, it seems she is not upset about anything that happened. She is very clearly concerned about me, but not angry. I think I even see some pride and admiration in her, as I make myself some breakfast and sit down next to her. I look back, and realize that I have done a damned good job of dealing with what fate has been throwing at me. Even when I had to deal with something Ben sensed about the future, which is what has driven him from me. On my feet, eyes open, middle finger up and out, loud and proud.

There is still a lot I need to make right, though. And two people that I desperately need to see soon, Kate and Carl.

I feel it is most important to catch Carl as soon as I can. I finish up my breakfast, and tell Grandma what I need to do. She tells me to not worry about the dishes, and to just go and take as much time as I need to set things right with him.

I drive over to his house, knock on the door, and huddle over to the side of his stoop where he can't see me from his peephole. He opens the door a crack and peeks through. As soon as he recognizes me, he pulls the door all the way open and takes a step back, leaving me room to come in. There is a lot on his face I can't read, but he doesn't look mad at me, at least. Just, like he is glad to see me, but doesn't really know what to do with me now that I'm in front of him again.

“Should I have called first?” I ask.

“Uh. Probably not. I think I would have spent the whole time you were on your way fretting. But I’m also not presentable for company,” he says. He looks disheveled, as if he hasn’t been up long, and didn’t really sleep well. He self-consciously puts his hand in front of his mouth, as if painfully aware that he hasn’t brushed his teeth yet.

“Can we chat while you clean up?” I ask.

“Sure, sure. Come on,” he says. I follow him as he walks toward his bedroom. “You, know, I never should have come out looking for you. I knew better, and it wasn’t cool at all. I’m terribly sorry about that. You and Ben deserved your privacy without me all snooping all over the place.”

“It might be for the better that you did,” I say. “Your arrival started a little chain of events that led to Ben sending me home and now I have no idea where he’s off to.”

Carl stops suddenly at the door to his bedroom. “What?” He stands at the threshold, confused for a moment, like he is suddenly trying to make three decisions all at once, and their stepping all over each other. “Sorry. Keep talking,” he says, closing the bedroom door most of the way.

I hear him start undressing.

“So, after you showed up, he got panicky that a… Oh, how do I even start telling any of this?”

“I know about Ben, and I know there is another vampire looking to kill him, and that she’d take you as well.”

“Oh, good,” I say. “Ok. This makes everything easier. By the way, Ben told me about you, too, and Nathan’s a demon and Grandma and I are witches. I think that covers everybody weird in Stokers Mill, unless you know of something else I don’t.”

“Nope.” Ben emerges from his room in a bathrobe, and crosses the hallway to the bathroom. He again mostly closes the door, and starts running the shower.

“Ok. Back to the story. Ben completely flipped out that the hunter might have followed you out there.”

“We don’t think she did. Seems like Nathan got her off my tail for a little while.” I hear the shower curtain open and close, so I step into the bathroom and sit on the sink.

“That’s good,” I say. “Because Ben wasn’t looking forward to having to face her down. Anyway, while we were out looking for you, he finally figured out that I’m a witch, and completely freaked out. He went on about horrible things will happen if we stay together, and that I needed to get as far away from him as possible, and he needs to get as far away from here as possible. I mean, he didn’t even give me time to tell him that if terrible things are going to happen if he’s with me, he’d already been with me for quite some time. The ball’s rolling now, you know? You can stand in front of it or get behind it.”

“So just like that, it’s done between you two?”

“As far as I’m concerned. To not even give me a chance, to just abandon me just like that?”

“He doesn’t feel about fate like you and I do,” Carl says.

It is surprising to hear him defending Ben at this moment. I had gotten used to Ben giving Carl a certain amount of respect, but all that time, I was still picturing Carl as harboring a huge amount of hostility toward Ben. Considering the warmth I still feel for my time with Ben, I’m glad that Carl seems to have tempered his opinion in the time I was gone.

“Not all of us are lucky enough to be descended from crazy Viking werewolves who actually looked forward to fighting valiantly for the losing

side at the end of the world."

"True," I say.

I find something else sitting on the tip of my tongue, dying to leap out, but I bite it back. What I did with Nathan last night was impulsive and a bit rash, but also me taking advantage of a small window of opportunity to have him that may never open again. From what I know, Carl and I have plenty of time to develop a relationship different than the one we've had up until now. But I woke with that familiar ache inside of me again, and this time, it's been screaming Carl's name at me.

"Can you toss my toothbrush over the curtain?" he asks, completely oblivious to what I'm feeling, just two feet away from him.

I grab the brush and toothpaste, and resist the urge to open the curtain to give them to him, instead of putting them into his upraised hand.

"You know," I say. "When I got so mad at you right before Ben and I went on the run. Every day while I was out there, I regretted that the last thing I ever said to you was angry. And I also missed you terribly the whole time. I can never take back what I said, and I hope that you'll be able to see that I truly regret it."

Carl stops brushing for a second to say, "So, for ten minutes, your temper was as short as mine, and you spoke from it instead of your heart? I've been there. I understand."

"Good," I say. "It really did hurt me to realize how poorly I treated you, when you were really doing your best to care for me, and after all the time we've known each other and been best of friends."

He peeks his head around the shower curtain, so he can speak to me, face-to-face. "There is really nothing to forgive, Ivy. We've been wrapped up in some pretty heavy stuff, and some of the time, we weren't the best

people we could be. But we did what we did, and most of the time, we did the right things by each other. That's the best anybody can give."

"Nobody's perfect?" I ask.

"Nobody. Now, you go scoot on out to the living room so I can dry off and get dressed again."

"No," pops right out of my mouth. I am simultaneously mortified, and aware that I'm smiling.

"Ivy," Carl says. "I'll tell you once more to go. If you don't. Well, I'm going to handle you like my crazy Viking werewolf ancestors. I'm not going to fight what happens next, I'm going to embrace it. Now, living room. Now."

I swallow hard. I know that I'm supposed to get with Carl, and most of my body wants to, but within the last day, I've been with one man, lost him, threw myself on a second that I will never have again, and am now making an earnest pass at a third. There's a part of me that is screaming that a proper young lady simply does not do things like that.

Whereas the rest of me is screaming that I spent too much time being too proper for everybody else's expectations, and maybe I can catch up for a bit. Plus, I may not be the ancestor of crazy Viking werewolves, but if I'm fated to be with Carl, I should face it like a witch.

I take Carl's towel from the bar and hand it to him. He shuts the water off and opens the shower curtain wide. His naked body is so different from Ben's or Nathan's. Carl is all powerful and clean masculinity. Nicely developed muscles, a broad chest and shoulders that look like they could hold up the world, thighs that look like they could carry that weight, all covered by dark, luxurious hair. As he dries off, I put my hand to the opening of my blouse.

"Should I unbutton it, or do you want to tear it off of me?" I ask.

“Undress yourself for me,” he says.

I find this sudden impish impulse that makes me hop off of the counter and turn my back to him. I look over my shoulder and watch while he continues drying off, and I unbutton my blouse. By the time I shrug out of it, I have got the full and undivided attention of his entire body. I am also glad that I had the foresight to make sure I was dressed to impress under my clothes. I undo my pants, and put way more swing into my hips as I lower them to the floor. I step out of them and turn to face Carl. I lean back against the door jamb and arch my back, to show off my breasts. I reach back to unclasp my bra, but don’t take it off. Even when I straighten up, the straps keep me covered, until I bend forward at the waist again to deliver a kiss to that most masculine part of his body.

I take a chance, and as I take him into my mouth, I bite down lightly. A very approving growl escapes Carl’s mouth. I do the necessary wiggle to let my bra fall to the floor, and let my teeth scrape up and down his shaft lightly. He finds many ways to communicate his appreciation.

I stand up and turn around again, back to him. I put my feet together, hook the waistband of my panties, and slip them down to the floor. I put a hand on the door jamb for balance, and part my legs wide. A glance over my shoulder, at the look on his face, tells me my instincts are still spot on with guessing what he might like. Seeing him almost panting, towel in his hand forgotten, eyes fixated on me, I feel much less self-conscious than I ever expected I might, showing off and exposing my body to a man that way I am now. Instead, I feel intensely powerful, using it to such tremendous effect on him.

“Alright. I’ve undressed for you. Now what?” I ask.

Carl steps up and gives me a playful spank. I yip in surprise and stand up. He takes my hand and leads me past his bedroom – a quick glance

shows it’s quite a mess and the bed is unmade – to the living room. He sits on the couch and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around me. The best way to describe the way he kisses is devouring. He kisses deep, and he nips and bites. Not only on my mouth, but my chin, neck earlobes, shoulders, the tops of my breasts. His mouth moves all over me, tease here, tease there, bite hard enough to leave a little mark, but not enough to be unpleasantly painful. I take his cue, and every change I get, I bite and nip at him, or suck on his skin. Every time I really clamp my teeth onto him, I can feel it in his entire body.

Yet for all of this, I also feel supremely protected at the same time. His arms are solid and real around me. Being up in his lap, I am fully aware of his body. He is not claiming me or possessing me, he is enfolding me, surrounding me. I now know a new shade to the meaning of being embraced. Yet I am still free within that embrace to tease him and bite him and leave marks on his skin. I feel like I belong to him, not in a sense of being owned, but in a sense of being a part of him. This must be what it means to be a part of his intimate pack.

His chest hair is just thick enough that I can grab onto it when he touches me somewhere that sends an especially powerful jolt of pleasure through me. That builds his own excitement and possibly despite himself, he redoubles whatever it was he was doing to me.

One of those times, he starts something cascading in me that cries out for relief. I grab his hair and twist off of his lap, sitting back on the sofa and guiding his head down between my legs. He smiles up at me, and starts rubbing his beard against the inside of my thigh. It’s nice, but not what I put him down there for.

“You can play later,” I say, and I pull his face all the way up and grind myself against him.

He understands immediately what I am demanding, and accommodates my need by devouring me as much down there as he had been to my mouth, neck, and shoulders. He is attentive, but not subtle. Once he finds the spot, he attacks it with a vigor that makes me scream out loud and take two big handfuls of his hair so I can keep him where I want him while I thrash my way through a very primally satisfying climax. As soon as I'm released from its grip, I let go of him. He starts with the beard on the inside of the thigh again, his mouth moving between playful nips to my thighs and belly, and long, wet strokes of his tongue up between my legs. After giving me another good orgasm, he is nipping at my inner thigh again.

"Mark me," I say, and I feel him tighten his bite a little bit and suck on the skin capture between his teeth. "Like you mean it," I say, gripping his hair, and wrapping my other thigh over his shoulder, so I can crush his mouth into the task. The most delectable sensation of pain rises from the part of my leg he is biting, that turns out to also fire off pleasure sensors all over my body. "Harder," I say. "Harder!"

He clamps down, and I feel him shift his body to get a better angle on his task. I put my free hand down between my legs, and that focuses all of the pleasure that his painful bite is causing right where I need it, and I find myself screaming again while I close my thighs tight around him. When I let up, he backs away with a desperate inhalation.

"Sorry," I gasp, realizing that I must have smothered him with my thighs.

"I'll take it as a compliment," he says, through a very heavy breath. He takes his hands and parts my legs wide, and looks down at my thigh, very obviously admiring his work. I look down to see tooth marks deeply embossed in skin that is a deep, dark red. One of his hands suddenly pulls back, and I realize way too late to avoid a very sharp slap to the bite. The

pain is sudden, intense enough to cross my eyes and cause my body to reflexively start to ball up, but the sting itself is even less than momentary, leaving a deeper, hot, very pleasant soreness in its wake.

“Is that what you wanted?” he asks, when he sees me looking at the lighter, pink handprint overlaid upon the bite mark.

“Perfect,” I say.

“Good.” He kneels upright and moves closer to me, putting his hips between my wide-spread thighs. I know what’s coming next, and I smile brightly at him, and slide myself a little closer.

“Oh, no,” he says. “This is going to seem terribly cliché, but…”

He grabs one of my legs, and the next thing I know, I’m kneeling on the ground, upper body bent over the seat of the sofa. One of his hands is on the small of my back, the other guiding himself into me. He enters me slowly, maddeningly slow, and he knows what he’s doing, by the way he presses down on my back to keep me from hurrying him up.

It becomes very quickly apparent to me that this position is a whole different world than my admittedly limited experience up to this point. The angle is different, and he hits completely different parts of me, opens up completely different sensations. Once he gets all the way in and settled, I appreciate the slow entry, because I am feeling completely filled again, but in a very different way than before. He pulls back, then slides back in. Each thrust comes a little faster than the one before, and a little deeper, until I feel his hips slap into me. A few more, and I’m being pushed into the cushions of the sofa. I find that by crossing my arms and resting my forehead on them, I can at least keep my face clear so I’ll be able to breathe.

That knowledge frees me to tell Carl, “Like you mean it.”

“Like this?” he asks, and his next thrust slaps against my hips, and I feel the solidity of the wall through the sofa.

“Like that,” I say. The next few minutes of my life are lost in a fury of sweat and grunts and screams, me throwing cushions, the sofa banging off the wall, the sharp sound of his body slapping against mine, nails raking down my back, somewhere in there, teeth at the nape of my neck…

Culminating in Carl yelling, “Yes! Yes! Oh, Yes!” as I brace myself with my arms against the back of the sofa and push my hips against his with everything I’ve got, trying to get him even deeper into me.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Carl Wilson

“It’s not going to get any better,” Grandma says, coming out of the bedroom. She smells strongly of healing herbs and incense she was using on Ivy, and she wiping off her magical tools before putting them back into her satchel. Nathan is sitting across the room from me.

Ivy is twelve weeks pregnant. She claims it is Ben’s, but all three of us in the room know vampires are sterile. All three of us also know beyond every shadow of a doubt that Ivy is special in ways far beyond what any of us had ever suspected. Even Grandma with her family prophecy that someone in her line would bring a child into the world that would irrevocably change the vampire lines, never suspected that it would be a child with vampire blood that would do it. Yet here Ivy is, and Grandma cannot deny that the child in her womb has vampire blood.

He also has wolf blood and demon blood in him. The baby growing within her is the son of a human mother and three fathers that are other than human. There are still so many things that I do not understand about my child, about what he will be and what he will do. I don’t feel too bad, though. Even Emily and Nathan who have their own abilities to see pieces of the future do not know exactly how everything will play out.

What does concern me, though, is that Ivy's health is deteriorating rapidly. Emily says she's never seen a case of morning sickness as bad as Ivy has had. We have tried every possible food or beverage we can, to try and see if anything will stay down, but almost nothing does. The few things we can get her to take, skim milk, plain rice, sometimes bread with a smear of butter on it, just don't have the calories or the nutrients to keep a pregnant woman and her baby alive. We have even tried raw blood, in case the vampire part of our son cannot tolerate anything different, but that turns Ivy's stomach immediately, and she throws up whatever else we have managed to get into her.

Sometimes Nathan and I go out and he uses some of his trickery here and there, and we bring home IV bags full of whatever people who can't eat get. Grandma has long held that a witch should know both old and new ways, so she has taken formal medical training – and has used it before when she's come across accidents while on the road – so we are able to sustain Ivy somewhat that way, but there's still no way we can keep up with the demands of the young life inside of her.

Nathan taps me on the shoulder and looks toward the door. The two of us leave Emily to cleaning up after her spellwork, and go out to my backyard. In the short time between when Ivy moved in with me and when she became too weak to leave bed, she had started making changes to the place. There are field stones along the fence line, one stone in front of every fifth fence slat, alternating between a darker and lighter gray. Pots of herbs are growing along edges of the porch, which I am managing to remember to water for her. She has done something, and there are now more spiders in the yard than there ever were before. In the basement, are several bottles of silver iodide she had me buy, but I can't do anything with them for her.

We sit down on a nice bench Ivy had Grandma bring over from their yard. This, I think, has absolutely no magical purpose, it is just a bench that Ivy is especially fond of.

“Any luck on your part of our little search?” he asks me.

Now that school is over for the summer, I’ve had time to see if I can find any sign of where Ben has gone. Since I do have some understanding of computers, I handle the electronic angles. Nathan does his part in other ways.

“You know I’m better than you, but I’m definitely not good,” I say.

“And there is an upper limit to what I can do from here with people,” Nathan says. Nathan would like to go farther afield, but he is by far the most powerful of the three of us caring for Ivy. He has access to magic and to powers that even Grandma has only heard rumor of, but there are some solutions you cannot solve by brute force. This is why Nathan and I are quietly seeing if we can find Ben. It is a long shot, but there may be a chance that somehow Ben can unlock the secret to helping Ivy through the pregnancy. It may be that a child as unique as the one Ivy is carrying needs the presence of all of its fathers to thrive.

“I am still only finding limited assistance from my kind as well,” Nathan says.

None of the demons of his position have been willing to muddle in mortal affairs again, and even the ones a few steps weaker have been uninterested. He has had some minor demons out searching, but they are spread very thin, and ones even below them are typically very close to specific places in the mortal world.

“I think I just need to move around,” I say. “Go out into the world and look for him. That’s how I found him last time.”

“Last time, he was just ninety miles away. He could be anywhere in the world now.”

I shake my head. “Ivy has taught me a lot about her magic. She says when you have nothing else, intent is everything.”

Nathan tilts his head to the side, considering this. “It can do no more harm than anything else,” he says.

While we’re sitting there, I hear Kate’s car pull into the driveway. I look over my shoulder as I see her coming into the yard. She has her laptop bag slung over her shoulder, which she usually doesn’t travel with, so I hope it’s good news.

Nathan and I slide over to make room between us. “Graylock,” she says, kissing me lightly on the cheek, and then she nods to Nathan. Now that he’s graduated, and with Ivy being in such dire straits, Nathan has moved out of his foster-family’s home, and into Grandma’s guest bedroom.

Because of the long closeness between Ivy and Kate, Grandma has decided to bring her in. It became very quickly apparent that we’d never be able to sustain any sort of lie about Ivy’s health with Kate, and for all of us – Grandma, Ivy, Nathan, and me, to all up and leave in short order would destroy both Kate and Ivy. They are too close, have been for too long, to be separated like that again. And Ivy needs everything she can get right now. Kate’s visits are one of the few things that can get Ivy looking alive for a bit anymore.

“You have something?” Nathan asks, touching her laptop bag.

“Maybe,” Kate says. She pulls her computer out and goes to one of the dozen open tabs in her browser. “Very tenuous, I know, but check this out.”

It’s a classified ad for a motorcycle, from out in Ohio. It means nothing to me, but Nathan is immediately interested. “Still for sale?”

“No,” Kate says. I have been tracking the KTM 690 Duke IIIs on every used bike site I can find. That model was only made for three years, ’08 to ’11, and there’ve got a small, but really dedicated fan base. You mentioned a lot of vampires are really bad creatures of habit,” Kate says, nudging me. “So maybe she just might try to find the same ride she used to have. This listing went up this morning, and I got in touch with the seller, played myself as somebody really interested, but needing to check in with the bank about a loan. Turned on some charm, didn’t try to bargain him down. So he just emailed me twenty minutes ago. Somebody straight up wired him the asking price, and says she can be there later this afternoon to pick it up. Could this mean she’s in Ohio tracking Ben?”

“She could have the capacity to travel quickly, or to have somebody take possession for her. The Negre have a good network that can do things like this really fast,” I say.

“If I can get there before the pickup happens, I’ll be able to tell if it’s her or a Negre associate,” Nathan says. He looks up at the sun. “Next flight from Denver to wherever in Ohio that seller is.”

Kate starts clacking at keys on her computer. “Ninety minutes,” she says.

Nathan shakes his head.

She does a little more searching. “11:15, arrives at 4:30.”

“I can barely make the airport,” he says, and is on his feet.

“Need me to book the flight?” Kate calls to him, but he’s already fishing keys out of his pocket and single-mindedly focused on getting to his car.

“He just needs to get to the airport. Trust me on this,” I say.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ben Wake

I simply can’t believe that Heather is hopping on a plane right now to fly to Ohio to buy a motorcycle. The BMW G650 GSs she is riding is perfect for what she needs. But the Duke III is just that much more perfect, apparently.

Maybe separating our paths for a while isn’t a bad thing, though. It will muddle the trail for a while, and it is in character for her to be obsessive about her equipment. I remember from the days when I was first training her, the one thing I wished she would lose was her tendency to find one thing she liked, and stubbornly stick to it to an impractical degree.

I should back up eleven weeks or so. I had stayed in Omaha for a few days activating a burner identity I’d set up, to hold me over until I could establish somewhere new again. The wonders of the modern age are that all of the work for the burner can be done online, as long as I and a few forged documents had a way of meeting each other. I was just waiting on my passport to be delivered to a local delivery service for an in person pickup. I was literally an hour or two from getting the call when the door to the room I was renting opened suddenly, and there was Heather, the Negre hunter that had picked up my trail. She had weapons out already. I was reworking the calculations of whether killing myself then and there would actually get

them completely off the trail or not, when she set her gun and knife down on the table between us.

“You got yourself out. Can you help me?” she asked.

One thing I know about vampires, and especially Negre, is to always assume there is a layer of deception involved in any dealings we have with each other.

The thing is, I trained her. I had learned to tell when she was lying. And she is terribly resistant to change. That was the thing that kept her from ever evolving beyond being a good hunter to a great one. And it is why I chose to stay at the cabin and lay as low as I could with Ivy instead of immediately running. I knew her methods, and I knew that she would try to find people that might know where I had gone, and watch what they did, while she also cast the net around hubs that I would be likely to travel through. She has a great mind for that kind of coordination of the Negre network to do the grunt work while she would split her personal investigation across multiple fronts. And that was why the moment I saw Carl on the property, I had to assume she would likely be out there within hours, and that I had to separate from Ivy and get noticed by her network.

“You know I can’t believe you,” I said. But I am reworking my calculations. If she is being honest with me, which I can count as a definite possibility, Ivy is safe. If she is lying to me, I can at least see if Ivy is of any interest to her. And if Ivy is of interest, I last saw her in the company of Nathan, who strikes me as somebody that can protect her, at least for a while, especially if Ivy will open up to him. So throwing myself out the window and taking one of my own weapons to myself could be discarded as an option.

“I know that. Just like I can’t trust you, because at the first sign you think I’m a risk to you, you’re going to kill me.”

“This puts us at an impasse,” I told her.

“Can you extend your stay in this room?” she asks me. Keeping half an eye on her, I pull out my phone and check the app. “Two more days,” I say.

“Do it, then find another room somewhere nearby. We’ll leave all of our weapons in this one, and we’ll go to the other room, both unarmed, and we’ll see if we can reach some sort of trust framework.”

So we did that. We took full advantage of the two days that we knew our arms were in a separate location, with nothing in our possession but the clothes on our backs and my phone, while she told me everything that had happened since she left my tutelage in 1965. It was an ongoing interrogation, me looking for places her story might have been inconsistent or contradicted itself. I found none. And in that time, she asked nothing of me, only telling me what she had picked up about me when she realized I had moved to Colorado. Yes, she knew I moved socially with a thrope and that I’d taken a warm lover. What surprised me is when she revealed that Nathan is a demon. When she explained to me the chain of logic by which she deduced it, I could come to no other conclusion myself.

“So the hunter that was after me, that something killed out in the woods in January. Nathan did that?” I ask.

“Yes. You had correctly deduced it was a demon, but you were fooled by trappings of a completely random encounter that he had laid around the entire thing. The whole time you were in Stokers Mill, you spoke daily with a demon. One that was letting you live, and one that I realize had actually spoken to me once, knowing full well what I was, and had probably been within feet of me at least one other time, and it did not touch me. I had started hunting you, thinking that this conversation we are having right now might happen. The second time I realized that the demon had been within striking distance and did nothing but mess with my bike, I realized things in

the world are starting to change, and that it's way past time for me to get on the side of right."

At the end of the two days, wisdom and my survival instincts told me to still distrust her on principal, but I was tentatively willing to take her at her word enough to work with her. We went to pick up the last of my burner identity credentials, and decided to start moving around the country, to give the illusion she was still following me, and to take eyes away from Stokers Mill. She hadn't reported to her handlers that she suspected she was on my trail, just that she had detected a high-value target in the area. That would usually indicate somebody in a leadership position in one of the other clans that the Negre were not in temporary alliance with. Negre hunters are given a good degree or autonomy in their work as long as a head is delivered to the castle within six months to a year.

As of this moment, having just dropped Heather at the airport, we're only four months into her actively hunting me. She has a little more time before she needs to either bring a head, or call in help for the hunt. Two months, at least, that we can travel around together while we pretend I have been flushed into the open and she is in pursuit.

I decide to spend the two days it will take her to pick up the motorcycle and meet me again seeing what I can find out about Ivy from a distance. I know that I cannot directly contact anybody in Stokers Mill. Paul and Carol, even if I would dare to contact them, would know nothing. I kept my life as opaque from them as I could. None of Ivy's closest circle would be safe to contact, because I have no idea how they would take me getting in touch. The might create the kind of noise that would draw others of my kind to town, just because they sensed the disruption. Logging into any of my social networking would be a bad idea, in case any of my false identity had been discovered. But logging into the site of the local newspaper, creating

sock puppets to just see what people in Stokers Mill are saying in public posts are safe.

I pick up nothing about Ivy that really says anything. She graduated, but she is not on the scholarship roll for one of the most prestigious ones she had applied for. Probably because she'd missed some critical tests while she was hiding in the woods with me. I could make up for that financially easy enough. Money is not a problem for me, even getting a large amount of it is easy enough. But I owe her way more than compensation for the money she lost to make up for what I had done to her. For what may still happen to her as a result of our brief relationship.

I burn more than an afternoon on the endeavor, and know barely more when I started. I find myself terribly agitated and feeling helpless. The thought crosses my mind that I must feel like Carl does when he feels caged and unable to act directly to remedy a situation he is in.

The thought of Carl sparks something in me. It is afternoon, I have been hiding out indoors, away from the sun, all day. You can traverse a good distance overnight. I could make it to Stokers Mill by morning. At least pass near the house, long enough to just put eyes on Ivy for a moment, make sure she is well.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Nathan Marsh

I drive as fast as I dare in a stolen rental car from the airport to a little motorsports shop on the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio. There is no KTM 690 Duke III in the parking lot or visible through the windows of the small showroom. I walk inside and there isn't one there, either. I find somebody that looks like they're in sales, and they tell me it just went out the door an hour ago.

I ask to speak to the employee that completed the transaction, and am led to a desk near the service bays. I sit down at the desk and inquire about the buyer. Even without using any powers, I can put people at ease in conversation. He apologizes, but says he cannot remember anything about the buyer. I ask again for any information he can give me, this time using some powerful influence on him. I tried subtlety once. I do not have the time to keep playing. The fact that he can give me absolutely nothing, even with me leaning on his psyche tells me the hunter had used some compulsion on him to blank herself from his memory.

"I need to see the sales contract," I say. He produces it from a desk drawer. Everything on it is in perfect order, for a vehicle purchased by the representative of a holding corporation. I am sure that looking up the corporation name will get me nothing useful in a timely manner, if at all.

I leave the building and call Kate to tell her it was a good lead, but that I had just missed contacting the hunter. “This close, I don’t want to give up just yet. Will Ivy be alright until morning without me?”

“I’m going to spend the night here,” Kate says. “I will get in touch right away if anything changes, alright?”

Kate’s promise does little to reassure me, but I also cannot walk away from this chance to find the hunter, and through her, perhaps locate Ben. I stand next to the car I stole, and look at the streets leading away from it, trying to feel out which one might be the one the hunter took. I get a sudden and powerful sense of a vampire coming up from the east. Too strong to be the hunter, for one, but also very different than her presence. I think very obscure thoughts as a car pulls into the parking lot next to mine, and the driver gets out. This one is handsome and slick, looking like a twenty-something startup superhero from the Silicon Valley, and carrying himself like somebody long used to a mantle of authority. This vampire is not insignificant in whichever clan he is in. I follow at a discreet distance, and see him work his way to the same employee I had talked to. His use of compulsion glows in my true sight, and I see him get nothing more for his trouble than a look at the same tax and title forms I had seen. I shed my mortal body as fast as I can, and tail, slipping invisibly into his back seat. As he drives off, he makes a phone call over the hands-free, in French. That narrows him down to one of three clans.

We start driving fast down the highway as the person on the other end of the call loops others into a conference call. It looks like my hunter is now being hunted. The hunt seems well organized, too. Staying on it sounds like my best option for finding the one I want. I have to take a gamble that Ivy will be well, since my phone is currently in otherspace.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ivy Sparks

“Carl. Get Carl,” I say.

Kate steps out of the room, and comes back a few minutes later with Carl.

“Do you remember how to get to the cabin?” I ask.

“Yes. I honestly don’t think I’ll ever forget it,” I say.

“Take me there.”

“You’re not well enough to travel, Ivy.”

“I’m not well enough for anything,” I tell him.

“Why?” Carl asks me.

Out in the hallway, I can see Kate on her phone. Probably calling Nathan. I can tell by the way she’s standing. She has always stood that certain way when she talks to him.

“It’s where I last saw Ben,” I say. “It just feels right, if all of this is going to end, for it to end where it started.”

“What are you talking about Ivy?” Carl asks me.

“This baby, our baby, yours and mine and Nathan’s. It’s killing me. I’m not going to make it much past sundown. Get Nathan back, have him meet us there. If I can’t have Ben with me when I die, I want to at least be in the last place he and I were happy.”

“You’re not going to die, Ivy,” Carl says.

“Grandma!” I croak. I want to shout it, but I don’t have the strength to project much beyond the room. Still, she knew I was calling for her, and while Carl is trying to argue with me, she comes into the room.

“What is it, dear?”

“Tell him to take me to Ben’s cabin.”

Grandma looks at Carl then back at me. “Do it,” she says to him.

Carl opens his mouth as if to say something, then shuts it. He rarely argues with her, but her face tells him now is not the time.

“Kate?” I ask, looking toward the doorway.

She shakes her head. “I can’t reach him.”

“Come with us, please,” I say.

With Carl on one side of me and Kate on the other we get out to Grandma’s old lady car. It’s the biggest one at the house, and has the softest ride. Even so, the two hours it takes to get out to the cabin seem to take twenty. The baby inside of me is thrashing around, and I can feel it draining away my blood. I dry heave constantly, sure that one more spasm of my guts is going to bring my own feet and out my mouth. Kate cradles my head in her lap, stroking my hair while Grandma sits, half turned around in the front seat, and constantly works magic to give me strength and dull my pain.

Finally, Carl stops the car. He and Kate get me into his arms and he carries me across the highway. The midday sunlight is bright on my face, and I know that I will never look up at it again. It is burning my eyes, but I can’t look away. When we come under the shade of the trees, I feel an immense sadness settle over me, that the sun is now hidden from my view. It is only when we come through one small clearing and I can see sky above

me that the sadness lifts for a moment. But I tell myself that in a little while, we'll be at the cabin, and there will be a clearing there as well.

I lost the strength to hold my head up, and it lolls backwards. I see one of the trees where a strip of bark was removed, one of Ben's markers of a place he wanted to route any other vampires coming onto the land. I wonder how the spiders in those corridors are doing. I called spiders to Carl's house when I moved in, because I missed the sense of those fine ladies out around my home their webs being part of the greater web of protection keeping me safe.

Carl stops walking to readjust how he is holding me, so my head can rest on his shoulder. He kisses the top of my head as he does so, and his beard tickles me.

We hit sunlight again and Carl stops suddenly, so suddenly that he overbalances and almost drops me. The cabin must have taken him by surprise. I turn my head to look at the little home Ben and I were building.

But it is not there. There are a few scraps of blackened and burnt metal, but no cabin. I can see where the field stone fireplace and chimney were, though that had collapsed, and what part of it still stands is also black with soot. "It's gone…" I say. Carl takes a few steps closer to the burnt ruins. Already, there are green plants sprouting around the metal and stone things that didn't burn, poking up through the field of ash and bits of charcoal where a small home filled with books and herbs I'd collected had once stood. "It's gone," is all I can say. It is so unreal, I find that I can't even summon tears to cry about it. I am that numbed.

"Put me down," I tell Carl. He does, but keeps a steadying arm around my waist, standing behind me where I can lean back against him. Kate and Grandma come up to flank me.

"What happened?"

Nobody answers. For a long time we stand there in silence. I can't take it anymore, looking at the charred space in front of me. I take a tentative step. Grandma and Kate each take a grip on my arm to steady me.

"No," I say. "Stay here." I feel Carl's solid presence behind me suddenly move. A few seconds later, he is putting a stout branch in my hand. I lean on that and start to walk up the hill. I remember that when I turned one of the kitchen knives, I took off my agate pendant I'd worn for years, and I buried it up on one of the escape runs Ben had showed me. With the cabin gone and Ben nowhere to be found, I feel my tie to this land is now lost, so I want to bring that stone with me. I no longer want my life to end out here. I want to go to my circle now to breathe my last.

For each step I take up the hill, I have to rest. I look up and see that I have at least three dozen steps to take. As long as I am remaining upright, my family and my friends behind me are willing to let me do what I will.

Intent has power. I realize this when I find a little bit of strength to cover half the distance to where the stone is buried before I need to rest again, and then I make the other half. So as not to worry anybody, I take a rest before I lower myself down to the ground. There's an irregular patch of moss on a spur of rock that breaks free from the forest floor that reminds me of a bird. I follow where its beak is looking, five hand-widths from the edge of the stone, and I use the end of my walking stick to scrape at the soil. I feel the pendant, the little impact of something beneath the surface. I set the walking stick, and use my fingers to dig away the rest of the dirt, until I find the stone with its silver mounting, tarnished nearly black now from being buried. As I bring the stone up into the light again, I feel everything about the little plot of land change. A wave of confused emotion washes up to me from Carl, Grandma, and Kate. A powerful sense of hesitation rolls down from above, of curiosity and searching, then of fear, terror, regret, all

backlit by a blast of bright joy and a soft glow of relief. The weight of all those emotions drains a huge amount of what little energy I have left.

I hear footsteps coming down the slope toward me, but it takes me until I am in their shadow before I can move. I see a pair of very familiar shoes first. I roll onto my back and look up into the face of Ben Wake.

“I need you to turn me, Ben…”

Epilogue: Ivy Sparks

We are celebrating our son's second birthday after sunset. He wanted a backyard party, and I am much more comfortable outside at night than during the day.

The little boy's name is Benarl, after Ben, Nathan, and Carl, his three fathers.

Nathan cuts the birthday cake, a slice each for everybody but Ben and me. Benarl makes short work of his slice, having inherited Carl's appetite. Grandma sits beside Benarl, wiping frosting and crumbs from his mouth while trying to keep him from stealing her cake.

He starts fussing. Kate puts a hand on my shoulder, to signal me to remain seated, and walks over to him, taking the napkin from Grandma. He calms down, and lets her distract him with a glass of milk. Kate able to calm Benarl almost as well as I can.

Around her neck, Kate wears my old agate pendant on a red silk cord. She has chosen to never polish off the tarnish from its time buried by the cabin on it, but just by wearing it daily, the black patina has worn off on its own, and the fitting glows softly in light of the oil lanterns around the table.

The pendant is the only thanks Kate would take for her part in saving my and Benarl's lives. When Ben turned me at the cabin, the transformation was tremendously violent and almost instantaneous. Carl said he could barely change form as fast as I became a vampire. As soon as the excruciating pain let up enough for me to think, I knew I needed to feed immediately. Kate was right there, offering her wrist. Carl and Ben held my

arms down and Grandma sprawled across my legs so I couldn't grab Kate and attack her. They let me take only enough to sustain me and little Benarl for a few hours before they bundled me up from the sun under whatever cloth they had and drove me home. What I got from Kate was just enough and just in time to keep Benarl and me alive.

In addition to the necklace, Kate wears a matching agate bracelet. Grandma has taken her as a second student. After the damage done to my body by Benarl, I am unable to carry another child, so I am the last of the Esseriya witches. Thirty eight generations of only daughters, was a long run, one of the longest ever for a strictly hereditary line, and the longest for a line that takes only one student per generation. We do not know what the new line, starting with Kate, will be called. The teaching will change, because Kate will need to find her own power and her own sense of what works for her. Whether this new line will be a hereditary or gathering, and what it will be called are all things that will be known as they come to pass.

Since Kate is managing to keep Benarl calm, I move a few seats down the table to sit next to Ben. He and Carl are enjoying glasses of very good tequila, Carl taking small sips and Ben small sniffs, while Nathan drinks water with just a squeeze of lemon in it. Carl and Ben are still different enough that there will never be true friendship between them, but they work very well together. Nathan is somewhat remote, but also manages to bond very well with both Ben and Carl. While the latter two will occasionally get into arguments with each other, they always get along with Nathan very well. Once Benarl was born, my three men quickly figured out their individual strengths and weaknesses where it comes to fathering our son and maintaining our strange and decentralized household. It is best for the four of us adults to not share a house. I don't know how they would handle the tensions of knowing I'm bedded down with one of them on any night,

so we do a lot of bedroom shuffling. Generally, I will primarily live with one of the men for three days, take a day of rest for myself, and then take the next as my main partner. I still see each of them every day as long as they are near home, but there is only one I am ever sleeping with at a time.

I have moved back into my old room at Grandma's house. Carl has kept his place where he can have other werewolves come to stay. With the pressure of the Great War over, they are reclaiming their old practice of forming larger, looser packs, which means there is a lot of movement as individuals travel around to meet each other and start recreating the kinds of bonds that were lost.

Ben bought a patch of land above Grandma's house, off an old dirt trail. Heather, the hunter that was tracking him used to come up sometimes to watch the house. Now she lives up in his place with him. The day that Ben had turned me, the vampires that Nathan was with caught up with Heather. The fight was short and furious, and ended with Heather bringing four heads from the Rouxille clan to Romania, including the one of their best hunters, who had claimed at least eighteen Negre heads over 900 years. This put her close enough to the Negre leadership that she was able to take three of their lieutenants one hot and sunny day. The whole affair has created an amazing amount of disruption among the clans as all of the alliances have reshuffled and nobody seems to be consolidating their strength. What is most interesting is the change in Heather. While she and Ben were minding Benarl one day, he fell and cut himself. Heather did the thing all women do instinctively to a hurt child, she licked her finger and wiped at the wound. The second time she did this, she got some of his blood into her mouth, and he effectively turned her a second time. She became something very different. Still clearly a vampire, but changed. She takes no sustenance from warm food, but it does not harm her either. She is not

always cold. She has less power over mortals, but she can also tolerate sunlight as well as any person of northern ancestry. Her more extreme emotions and her contempt for mortals has also lessened greatly, and she's become a lot more empathetic than she ever was. The hunter Ben remembers training is not the same vampire that lives with him now.

This caused Ben to reconsider Sonia Vătafu's words. Everybody assumed she was warning them of the sun, but she wasn't: "Someday, young Benjamin, one of us Negre is going to bed a witch, and every one of us will feel the son. Not a one of us will escape the son, not a single Negre, not a single drinker of any other clan. Only the one who raises the son will escape the son."

When we saw the effects on Heather, Ben and I each took a drop of Benarl's blood, but nothing changed for us. After a lot of discussion and thought with Grandma and Nathan, we think it is because Benarl is our child that he is unable to turn us. The child cannot also be the parent is how Nathan put it. Heather and Ben have resumed hunting, but looking for clan renegades that have been in hiding. Twice they have brought a single drop of Benarl's blood out to a neutral location and given it, and the effect was the same as on Heather.

Then there is Nathan. He has also bought land near the house, just down the hill. He and Kate live there together for now. Kate is taking three more years to study with Grandma, and then will go off to study with other lines for several years. Nathan stays always within the loose kite on the map, drawn by Carl's house farthest out, and then the cluster of his and Kate's home, Grandma's and mine, and Ben and Heather's. He has taken responsibility for the safety of everybody within that domain, and he keeps a small phalanx of friendly minor demons and other invocates around it. The sum of all of the demonic energy effectively renders the domain

invisible to vampires, which is why Benarl and I never leave it ourselves. I worry terribly every time Ben sets foot outside of the domain, but with Heather at his side, he has yet to suffer any harm on his forays.

Sitting in my dark yard at night, with this strange assembly of people gathered around me, I feel both free from the fated events that brought us all together, and still tightly bound by them. I am loved in abundance by three of the most fascinating men in the world. I have a beautiful son, my grandmother is still healthy and strong, I have Kate always by my side.

But I also have to maintain a fiction about a previously unknown disease, maybe tick-borne, that has given me a severe sun allergy for the rest of my friends… And I will not leave this area of just a couple dozen square miles where I now live for many, many years, until things with the vampires are settled. Those most ruthless and heartless ones that exist only for destruction will destroy themselves in war, while Ben and Heather spread the new blood to the willing, drop by precious drop from our son.

And so, like a proper witch, I accept this fate that is mine. On my feet, eyes open, middle finger up and out, loud and proud when necessary.

###The End###

About Cheri Winters

USA Today Bestselling Author, Cheri Winters got hooked on Urban Fantasy through Kim Harrison, Patricia Briggs, and Laurel K. Hamilton. Now Cheri writes her stories with kick-ass heroines battling their way through adventure and mayhem.

When not writing, Cheri practices Muay Thai and Karate or catches up reading her favorite authors.

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